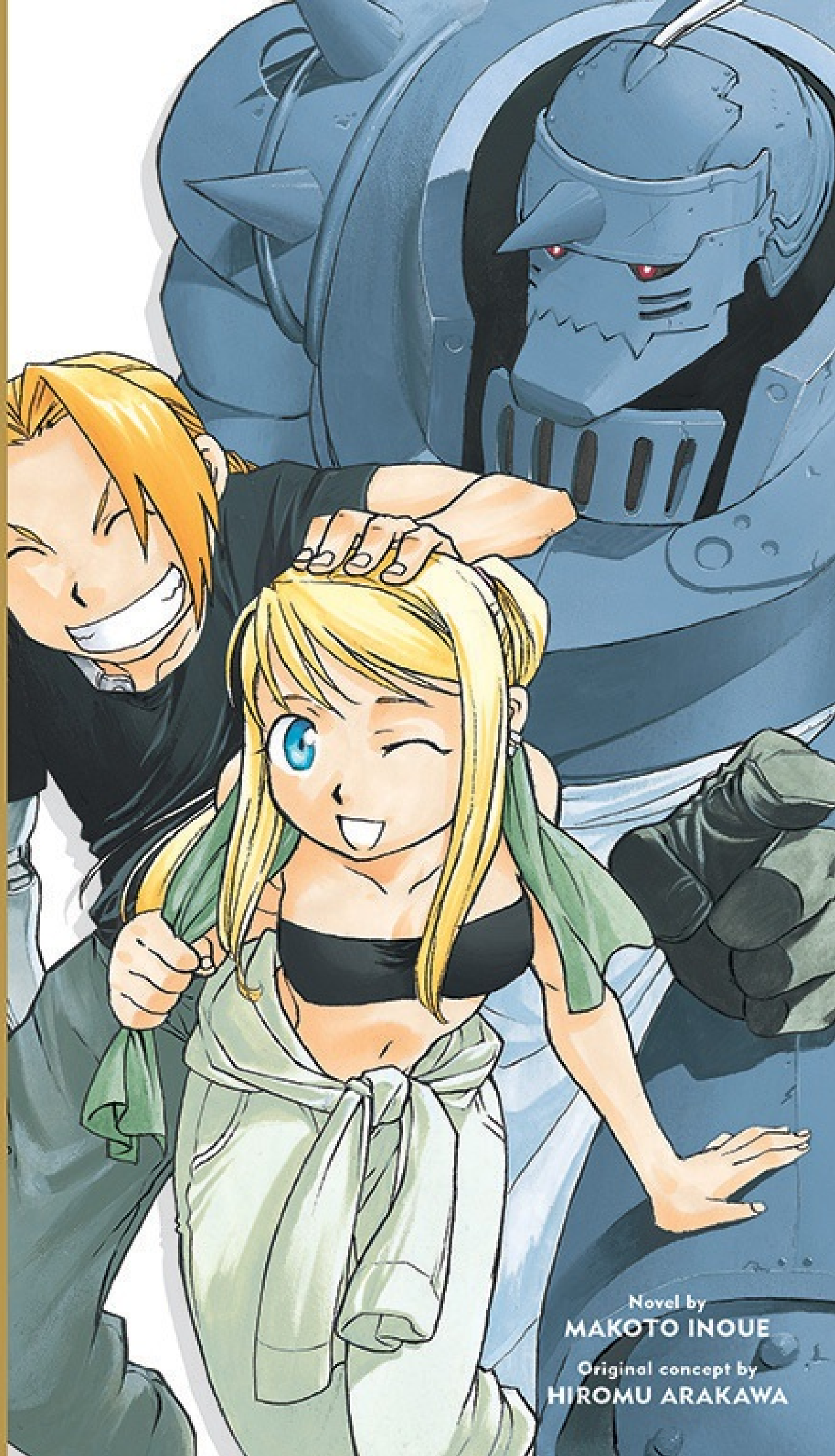


FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

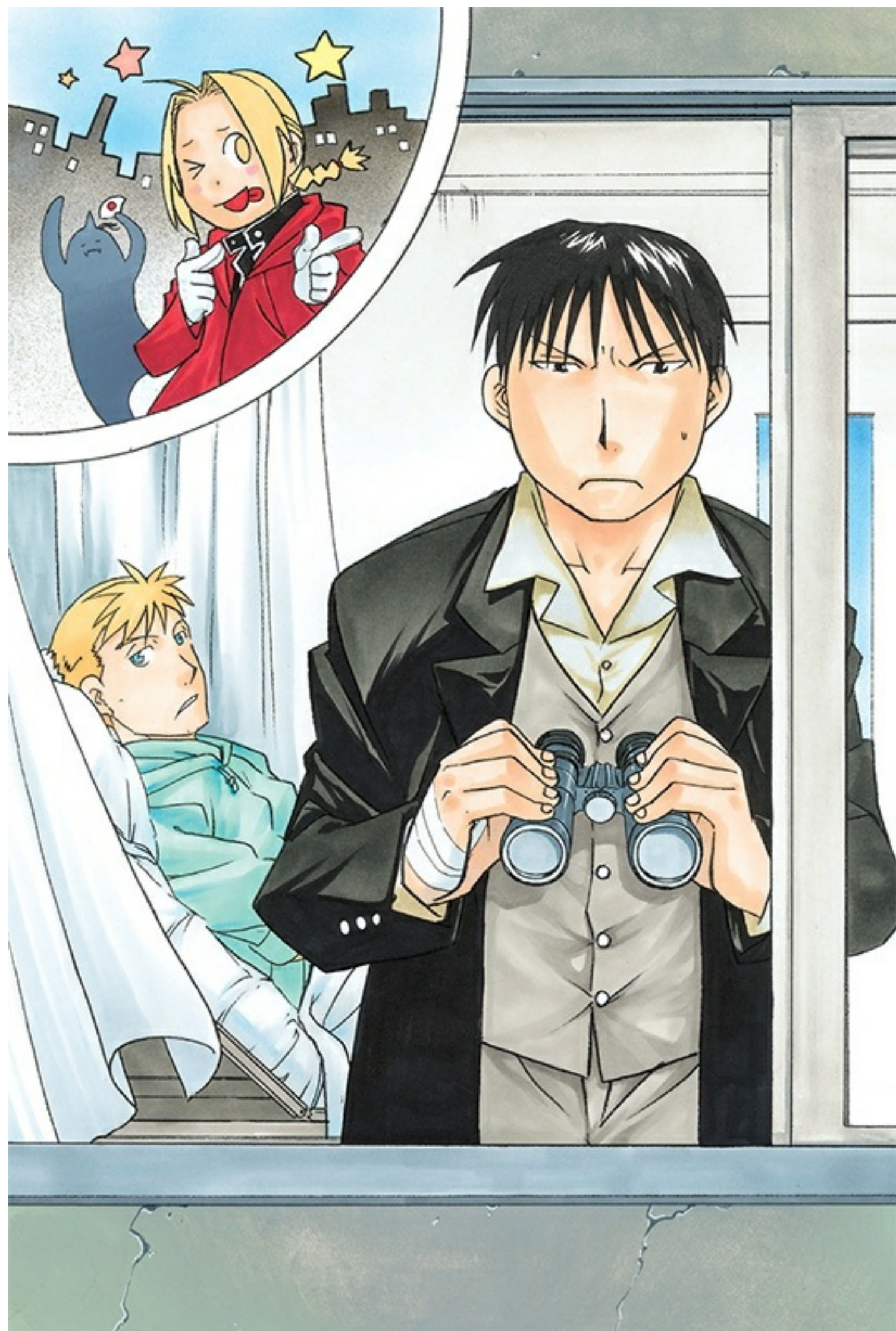
A NEW
BEGINNING



Novel by
MAKOTO INOUE

Original concept by
HIROMU ARAKAWA





FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST



A NEW BEGINNING



FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST



A NEW BEGINNING

Novel by
MAKOTO INOUE

Original concept by
HIROMU ARAKAWA

Translated by
JAN MITSUKO CASH
with **ASUMI SHIBATA**

VIZ MEDIA
SAN FRANCISCO

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

A NEW BEGINNING

NOVEL FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST VOL. 6 ARATA NA HAJIMARI © 2007 Hiromu Arakawa, Makoto Inoue/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

First published in Japan in 2007 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and VIZ Media, LLC. English translation © 2021 SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

Illustrations: Hiromu Arakawa

Cover and interior design: Adam Grano

Translation: Jan Mitsuko Cash with Asumi Shibata No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders.

Published by VIZ Media, LLC

P.O. Box 77010

San Francisco, CA 94107

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data available.

Printed in the U.S.A.

First printing, October 2021



viz.com

CONTENTS

A NEW BEGINNING



CHAPTER 1

[A NEW BEGINNING](#)

CHAPTER 2

[THE DAILY HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF RUSH VALLEY](#)

CHAPTER 3

[A GIANT MISTAKE](#)

CHAPTER 4

[A CHAIN OF MISTAKES](#)

CHAPTER 5

[LISTEN TO YOUR HEART](#)

CHAPTER 6

[HOPE FOR THE FUTURE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ALPHONSE'S TROUBLES](#)

[AFTERWORD](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)



CHAPTER 1

A NEW BEGINNING



PARCHED WINDS SWEEPED ALONG the mountain range. Sunlight bathed the rocky terrain, producing a heat that made the air shimmer. This was the south of Amestris, where the town of Rush Valley lay.

The town, having made a name for itself within Amestris for its steel industry, was frequented daily by travelers and merchants who came and left by way of steam locomotive. However, even the congested station temporarily regained a sense of peacefulness after each train departed.

The station roof shadowed the deserted platform after one such departure. In a corner of the platform, a lone girl spoke over a phone.

“Uh-huh, that’s right. Ed and Al are going to Dublith. I’m about to head to the place I was told to apprentice at.”

The girl seemed familiar with whoever she was on the phone with. A smile occasionally flitted across her face as she spoke, her wide blue eyes blinking in delight and her long blond ponytail swaying. As she chatted away, her silver earrings glinted with all the bright charm that the girl herself emitted. Wearing those sparkling earrings and a short black skirt with a white camisole, she was the very image of a girl with a sunny disposition.

“Uh-huh, yeah. I will. It’ll be fine ... You too, Granny. Okay then, I’ll call you later.”

After smiling for the person on the other end of the receiver, the girl—Winry Rockbell—hung up the phone.

“I wonder how far their train has gone,” Winry said, staring at the rails stretching out from the platform—the rails that had carried the departing train she had just seen off.

“Next time you can make me a better one of these!”

Those had been her childhood friend Edward’s parting words to her as he leapt onto the train with his little brother, Alphonse. He had pointed at his arm as he spoke. Edward, whose right arm and left leg were automail, and Alphonse, who had a suit of steel armor in place of a flesh-and-blood body, had started a journey several years prior in search of a way to regain their original bodies. Winry, an automail mechanic, had always supported the siblings from the sidelines. Ever since she lost her doctor parents when she was young, she had been raised by her grandmother Pinako, who was also an automail mechanic. Winry had been doing automail maintenance in her hometown, Resembool, for as long as she could remember.

However, Winry was standing at Rush Valley’s station at the moment, which was a long way from the place she had been born and raised.

“Winry, how about we get going?” A voice called to her from the ticket gate.

Paninya, a friend from Rush Valley who had come with Winry to see Edward and Alphonse off, waved at her. The brothers were the reason Winry was in Rush Valley in the first place. She had wanted to improve her skills so that she could create even better automail in order to help them regain their original bodies, even if just a day sooner. Because of that, she had decided to train in Rush Valley.

She would be living a new life in an unfamiliar town and training away from family. From this point forward, everything would be a new experience.

Black smoke rose high into the sky in the distance, from where the rails traced a loose curve and disappeared into the mountainous terrain. A thought flitted through Winry’s mind.

Maybe that’s the train they’re on.

The thought proved that she wasn’t immune to melancholy, but the emotion faded quickly as she watched the smoke dissipate into the azure of the sky. In

the melancholy's place, her chest overflowed with anticipation about what she would learn in the course of her apprenticeship.

"All right, time for me to get to work too!" she encouraged herself. Then, with a skip in her step, Winry headed over to the ticket gate where Paninya waited.

"WHOA, THAT'S BRIGHT!"

The blinding sunlight the south of Amestris was known for welcomed Winry as she left the station. When she raised her hand to her forehead to block out the sun's rays and see where she was going, she was able to make out a towering, bare rock face.

The mountains encircling Rush Valley contained a wealth of mineral deposits. Traces of mining scarred the rock faces, but the ores within had yet to be exhausted.

Though those ores had many uses, in this town they were primarily used for prosthetics. With the exception of assistive devices that supported physical movement, limb-replacement prostheses were divided into two broad categories. One was automail, a type of prosthesis that the user had full control of through the electrical impulses of their terminal nerve endings. The other consisted of ordinary artificial limbs made from steel and wood. Because of a large-scale civil war that had broken out nearly a decade prior, prosthetics engineering had advanced, which had brought about Rush Valley's rapid expansion into a large town.

The town, hailed as "the Boomtown of the Broken Down" and "the Mechanic's Mecca," was packed with rows of prosthetics shops. Studios had even been built in the cramped flat spaces that were few and far between within the surrounding rugged mountains. The streets overflowed with boisterous crowds, their voices making a general hubbub.

Paninya, a Rush Valley native, slipped through the throng with learned ease. She turned to look back at Winry.

"You left your stuff at the hotel, right? How about we grab that before heading to the shop?"

"Okay. Let's please do that."

“Then there’s a shortcut over here.”

Paninya, who had volunteered to lead Winry to her apprenticeship, put her hands together behind her back and lightly skipped forward. Both her legs were automail and, unknown to observers, contained a cannon and a blade. Her automail, which required a skilled hand to create, had been made by Dominic, the man who had introduced Winry to the place where she would be studying.

Rush Valley was teeming with other mechanics just as fantastically skilled as Dominic. Those very mechanics were flourishing their wrenches in front of their shops to show off, occasionally shouting solicitations.

“Welcome, welcome! The Junk Shop is having a sale for a limited time only!”

“You there, sir, passing by! Won’t you trade up to the latest in automail? I’ll whip up any order you can think of!”

“We’ll give you a free estimate! We even offer loans!”

Automail and run-of-the-mill prosthetics shops weren’t the only offerings—there were junk shops and loan establishments, as well as painters making a living by creating signs for the businesses. Any way you looked at it, the town revolved around prosthetics.

As a matter of course, customers gathered in droves. They came from all over Amestris to haggle in front of the shops, stipulate their orders to the mechanics in great detail, and obtain the prostheses of their dreams. The entire town of Rush Valley buzzed with the enthusiasm of both the buyers and the sellers.

“Wow ...”

Though Winry had walked through the town with Edward and Alphonse before, she was once again overcome by the passionate energy filling the place. Struck with admiration, she was swept away by the crowds she had yet to grow accustomed to. Several kids ran past her.

“Miss, outta the way! Outta the way!”

“Oh, sorry.” Winry quickly dodged them. When she looked at where they were headed, she saw a crowd forming in a vacant lot. She glanced over to see a weightlifting competition in progress between people with automail arms.

Bets were being taken on the strength of each participant's automail. The event felt like a natural fit for a town that revolved around automail, and the lot was bustling with spectating children, contestants waiting their turns, and mechanics waiting for an opportunity to coax the losers into having their broken-down arms serviced at their shops.

"Whoa, what kind of material do you think that automail's sheathing is made from?" Winry pondered, slowing down to take in the fascinating scene. While trying to catch a glimpse of the competition through the gaps in the crowd, she felt something abruptly bump into her.

"Ah!"

"Oh!"

A boy, about twelve or thirteen years old, had run into her. The boy had apparently been distracted by the competition too and hadn't noticed Winry passing right in front of him when he stepped out from a side road. They'd barely run into each other, but the impact had sent the boy reeling backward.

"Oh, careful!"

When Winry shot out her hand to catch him, she saw a crutch nestled under the boy's left armpit and a prosthesis peeking out from the right leg of his green shorts.

A kind-looking woman who seemed to be his mother immediately ran up to him from behind.

"I'm so sorry. Apparently he wasn't looking where he was going. You're not injured, are you?" said the woman, bowing her head apologetically. She wore a dress and a cropped jacket and carried a small, sleeping girl on her back.

"I'm okay. I was distracted too. I'm sorry. Did you get hurt?" Winry asked, feeling guilty for her inattentiveness. The boy shook his head.

"I'm sorry for running into you too," he murmured, then pulled away from Winry's hand, which had been keeping him steady. He adjusted his crutch and left. The woman bowed, then followed after the boy.

"You don't want to look at the shops on that street?" the woman asked.

“No ...”

“Really? Then let’s find other good places to go.”

The sound of their conversation and the crutch hitting the hard ground slowly faded away.

When Winry looked down the road that the boy had come from, she saw a line of many shops sporting large signs and boards featuring sales pitches. The boy had likely been looking for a place that could service his prosthetic leg or replace it with automail.

“What’s up? Did you want to make a stop at one of the shops?” asked Paninya. She’d been walking ahead of Winry, but had backtracked when Winry had trailed significantly behind.

“Not really.”

After Winry drew her attention away from the side street, she quickly caught up to Paninya.

A winning point of Rush Valley was the abundance of businesses that customers could choose from. Winry was sure the boy would find a good shop on his own.

On the other hand, it was a tough world for the vendors, but that was why mechanics wouldn’t forgo any effort to stand out. Friendly rivalry had incentivized the town to flourish, which meant that studying here would fully immerse a mechanic in state-of-the-art techniques. There was no better place Winry could have chosen to go to improve her skills.

As Winry’s spirits mounted, she asked Paninya, who walked next to her, about the place she would be training at. “So, what’s Atelier Garfiel like?”

“Hmm, right.” Paninya put her pointer finger up to her chin and gave a thoughtful look in reaction to Winry’s brimming curiosity. “I’ve never gotten serviced there, but based on how it looks from the outside ...”

Paninya seemed to recall something as she held her finger up and grinned. “It’s a real jaw-dropper, I suppose.”

“A jaw-dropper how?”

“You’ll know once you get there.” Paninya suppressed a laugh. She cast a sidelong glance at Winry, who looked dubious, as she quickly walked ahead.

“Oh, wait up.” Winry followed after Paninya, puzzling over her words. According to Dominic, the place she was going to had wanted help as soon as they could get it. They’d accepted her with open arms. In that case, she could only assume it was a jaw-droppingly busy shop—or that they would demand jaw-dropping quality from her.

Regardless of which it was, the skills she’d acquire through studying there would be certain to make jaws drop at home.

When she thought about it like that, Winry got a spring in her step. After she collected her things from the hotel, her heart was aflutter with anticipation as she and Paninya headed to the shop.

After a twenty-minute walk, Paninya announced, “This is it!”

When Paninya grinned and pointed out a building, Winry’s eyes went wide.

She beheld a gigantic—nay, *mammoth*—sign. She’d seen several other signs outfitted with flashy lights or twisted bits of steel on the way. She’d even seen establishments featuring bold writing and slogans boasting about their techniques. However, the sign in front of her eyes was nothing like any of those.

The sign that read “Atelier Garfiel” was written with script accentuated here and there by charming roses and leaves. An even larger rose had been painted next to the studio’s name. To top it all off, it was all in pink.

Flowing green curves had been used to represent the vines that complemented the flower. The petals blooming on the sign were beautifully set off by two leaves that were detailed down to their veins. Because of its elegant and cutesy design, Winry had almost mistaken the workshop for a florist.

“Whoa.” Winry’s jaw literally dropped.

Between the earthen tones of the mountains, the dull luster of the automail, and the abundance of male mechanics, Rush Valley had a somewhat rough-and-tumble image, yet here was a single rose blooming in the center of the town—a truly jaw-dropping sight.

“See—it’s jaw-dropping, right? Well, good luck! I’ll come by to let you know when I’ve found some work too!” Paninya gave Winry, who was half in a daze, a pat of encouragement on her back.

“Yeah. Thank you. Good luck to you too, Paninya.”

After she watched Paninya nimbly dash off, Winry stood under the sign in front of the garage-like studio. She peered into the shop in the hopes of greeting the owner, but it seemed that she had arrived right at rush hour. Several customers were waiting their turn, and she couldn’t figure out who this Garfiel character was.

“Um, Mr. Dominic sent me here to apprentice! I’m Winry Rockbell!” she yelled into the shop somewhat loudly.

A rugged voice about half an octave higher than she expected responded. “Just a moment, please!”

It seemed that Garfiel was further back in the studio, likely in another room.

She’d heard from Dominic that the proprietor was a man, but the shop seemed dainty and had an almost feminine atmosphere. Based on that, Winry simply assumed that Garfiel would be a thin and petite androgynous man.

Eventually, a figure appeared from the very back of the shop.

“Sorry for the wait.”

A beaming man came out, wiping his oil-smeared hands as he made his way over to her. He was giant—hulking, even—with a healthy helping of hair on his arms and chest.

He had paired a black tank top with black pants and suspenders. He also sported a mustache and a beard. His short hair was cropped tightly to his head, but his sideburns made neat curls on his cheeks.

No matter what angle she looked at him from, the rugged, unquestionably masculine man was the polar opposite of the rosy sign and the gender-neutral image she had assumed.

There was one aspect of him that *did* seem androgynous to Winry, if she had to comment. Those were his pursed red lips. It almost looked as though he

were wearing lipstick. When she looked more closely, it seemed he indeed *was* wearing lipstick.

The man placed his hand on his mouth and said in a rough but elegant voice, “Oh my, are you Winry? Why, what a cute girl you are! I’m Garfiel, the owner of this shop. It’s so very nice to meet you.”

She could almost hear him follow up his remark with a girlish heart. He also winked.

For a moment, Winry was so captivated by his elegant and charming mannerisms that she was rendered speechless, but she came back to her senses and quickly bowed. “I-it’s nice to meet you!”

Flustered, Winry had to admit that Garfiel, the studio’s proprietor, was a real jaw-dropper.





CHAPTER 2

THE DAILY HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF RUSH VALLEY



EARLY MORNING SAW THE FIRST TRAIN pull into the Rush Valley station.

Winry opened her eyes to the sound of the train's brakes echoing off the surrounding mountains. She was in the room she had been given for her stay, which was on the second floor of Atelier Garfiel.

Despite the morning gloom lingering outside, Winry sprang out of her bed to open the window. She then headed to the small sink in the corner of the room and scrubbed briskly at her face to rid herself of any remaining drowsiness. She took out a cropped tank top and pulled it over her head before slipping into a jumpsuit whose sleeves she tied snugly at her waist. To complete her work outfit, she pulled her hair up into a ponytail, then topped off the look with a bandanna wrapped around her head.

After getting dressed, Winry raced down the stairs and straight through the deserted studio. The place would fill with people once the business opened, but at the moment, it was silent.

She walked up to the shutters facing the main road and placed her hand on their handle.

"Up we go!" She heaved up the heavy shutters with a grunt. This had become one of her daily duties since coming to live at Atelier Garfiel.

A rush of refreshing morning air swept into the studio as the shutters rose. Though the city was sweltering during the day, the heat would fade at night so that dawn was accompanied by a cool breeze.

“Mmm, looks like it’ll be clear skies again today.” Winry stretched and took a deep breath before she dove into preparing for the day.

She dusted off the various electric machines, then swept and wiped down the floors. Next, she took the smaller tools used for more delicate components and arranged them by size for use on the table off to the side. She took blueprints out of an oblong box by the wall so that they would be ready for the clients coming that day, and placed some automail pieces, still wrapped in cloth, on the workbench in preparation for fixing them first thing that morning.

Setup alone made Winry’s forehead break out into a light sweat because there was so much to do, given their many clients and the large assortment of tools they worked with.

“Now all that’s left is to light the furnace.”

Wiping her sweat away using the sleeve of her jumpsuit, Winry sat in front of the furnace in the studio’s corner and lit it with a match. The furnace was an indispensable tool for crafting automail—it was used to soften the metal plates used as the exterior for automail, and for welding. Winry monitored the flames until they began to dance on the stacked logs before bringing several metal plates over to the furnace.

Just as the studio was finally prepared so they could dive into work, Garfiel peeked inside.

“Morning, Winry dear. Why don’t we have breakfast soon?”

“Good morning, Mr. Garfiel!”

Garfiel stepped into the studio after his cheerful greeting, but paused to stare intently at Winry’s face. He then let out a deep sigh. “Your skin’s so lovely today, as always. It’s positively radiant, my dear. It must be nice to be young.”

“Mr. Garfiel, you always look beautiful too,” Winry replied.

“My, you certainly know how to charm. But even if it’s just empty flattery, it’s still nice to hear.” At this point, Winry was used to Garfiel’s mannerism of placing his hand daintily on his cheek.

Garfiel would insist she had just been flattering him, but Winry meant every

word. He would never appear unshaven in public after having overslept, nor would he allow any poor health decisions to affect his skin. He was immaculate when it came to both his health and his clothes, and he likewise kept his work area free of needless clutter. Despite that, he didn't shirk from getting his hands dirty, and when he was busy, he would become more grease-stained than anyone.

From her place at his side, Winry found she admired Garfiel's ability to maintain a lifestyle that balanced hard work with taking care of himself and his appearance.

They had a simple breakfast of coffee that Garfiel prepared along with soup and bread. As they ate, the sun's rays began streaming through the window. Smoke rose from the chimneys of businesses in the distance, and they could hear the scattered sounds of shutters and windows opening. They even heard some metal beginning to clang.

"Now then, why don't we begin as well? Let's make the most of today, my dear!"

"Let's!"

Winry gulped down the rest of her coffee, savoring the joy of being here, where she could immerse herself in tinkering with her beloved automail to her heart's content.

CLIENTS STARTED POURING INTO Atelier Garfiel as soon as it opened. They didn't go out of their way to attract clients, but people were drawn to the shop anyway, apparently attracted by the reputation of the proprietor.

"Excuse me, I heard this store does custom automail?"

"Could you take a look at my shoulder? The place that made it is taking a holiday."

There were all kinds of customers: those coming in for their first automail, those requesting designs for upgrades, and those looking to adjust the automail they already had.

As the clients' voices filled the store, Winry flitted around on light feet, following Garfiel's orders.

“Winry, darling, can you screw in this outer plate? And then if you could handle the repair for that customer over there?”

“Got it.”

“We still have some of that metal plating we got in the other day, don’t we? If you could be a dear and cut those into shape number fifty-eight from this blueprint. Oh, and Mr. Kaas came by, so do make sure to take his requests!”

“Got it, working on it!”

There was no break in the stream of clients, with several always waiting on standby on the bench or on chairs to the side of the studio.

Despite the studio’s popularity, Garfiel and Winry were the only ones working there. Winry heard that Garfiel had managed by himself for a long time and occasionally had local mechanic friends come by to help. But the work had recently become too overwhelming for him to manage alone, and he had confessed to Dominic that he could use some help.

That was how Winry came to be volunteered as another hand who could hit the ground running.

Garfiel usually handled longtime regulars and new clients who required designs made from scratch, but Winry often took charge of walk-ins requesting repairs or adjustments. When things got busy, she jotted down requests from regulars and even drew out the roughs for their blueprints.

At first, Winry floundered a little, faced with a new environment, advanced tools she wasn’t used to, and types of prostheses she had never seen before. But it wasn’t long before her positive personality and ability to quickly learn on her feet kicked in, and now she could do everything at a brisk pace.

“Thanks for waiting, Mr. Kaas! What would you like today?”

Winry approached a gentleman who had gotten automail for both of his legs at Atelier Garfiel a few years prior. She held his chart at the ready.

“Well, hello there. To tell you the truth, my legs have started to feel heavier as I’ve gotten older. I thought it would be nice to get something lighter, even if it’s just for the plates of my knees. I would appreciate something more on the

affordable side.”

Kaas rested both of his hands on the cane planted before his chair. He had prioritized durability when he had his kneecaps made, but as a result, they were quite thick. Winry pulled out Kaas’s blueprints from the back of the studio and checked the measurements for his knee and the surrounding areas. She then thought about what could be used to make an acceptable lighter replacement.

“If you could please give me a moment.”

Winry ducked into the small back room, a finger on her chin as she thought. She then pulled out a single sheet of metal from the materials box before returning to the studio.

“How do you feel about this?” Winry asked.

The metal plate she’d brought to him was a sample manufactured by a company that processed and sold ores. Atelier Garfiel offered custom prostheses made from alloys blended according to their clients’ specifications, but it could be pricey. However, they also used mass-market materials produced by steel manufacturers, which they could offer at far more affordable rates.

“This is a brand-new product that only recently came out on the market. It’s got a fair price point and is incredibly lightweight,” Winry explained. She gave a quote for the price and schedule they’d need if they moved ahead with the metal. Kaas stroked his white beard while nodding along with interest.

It was difficult to get ahold of new materials like this out in the country, such as in places like Resembool. However, in Rush Valley, the mecca of prostheses, the companies themselves came to sell their products. This allowed mechanics to select and offer their customers the best options from a vast selection of materials. Winry was delighted that her current environment allowed her such luxuries, and she eagerly recommended the new materials that she had learned about.

“This material’s a little prone to rusting, so you’ll have to change your maintenance routine, but it will be considerably lighter than the automail you currently have,” Winry explained.

“Well, that’s very nice. I’m a little worried about different maintenance, but,” Kaas took some time to think about it, lifting and stroking the sample metal plate. The more he heard about the positives of the material, the more his concerns seemed to ease. “It must be good if you’re so confident in telling me about it. Well, then, I’d like to go with this.”

“Understood, sir!”

Winry took measurements of each part of Kaas’s body, jotting them down on his chart, before giving him an estimate on when the blueprint would be finished. She then gave his weathered automail a complimentary polish.

She helped Kaas to the street as he walked out with his cane, then she turned to the clients waiting within the studio.

“Apologies for the wait! Who’s next?”

A young girl raised her hand. Her name was Milia, and she’d already come by multiple times for maintenance. As Winry pulled out Milia’s chart and went over to her, she saw worry on the girl’s face and guessed why the girl had come. Winry’s brows furrowed slightly.

“Hello, Milia. Is your foot acting up again?”

“Yeah. No matter what I do, it just doesn’t feel right.”

Milia looked uncertain as she sat on the bench, shifting her leg forward to show a piece of automail that started at her ankle. The automail sparkled, reflecting the light in the room. It was relatively new and had only been fitted last month, but Milia had already come in several times to get adjustments done by Winry after feeling that it wasn’t working properly.

“All right, I’ll take another look at it,” Winry said. “First, please move it as I direct you to.”

Winry sat on the floor and pulled a screwdriver out of her tool kit to remove the automail’s outer plating. She then brought her face closer and tracked the movements of all the visible parts and cylinders.

“One, two ... Great. Next, rotate your ankle.”

Winry had Milia move her toes and ankles and watched closely to see how

the automail responded. “I can’t see any particular problems, but ...”

Winry pulled out a stick with a small mirror attached to its tip and inserted it into the automail to observe the pistons of the cylinders from every angle. As she worked, Milia spoke up hesitantly from overhead. “Hey, Winry? If you removed my foot, you could take a really close look at it, right? Could you do that for me?”

“Hmm.” Winry hummed as she inspected the device that intercepted electric signals again just to be sure it was functioning properly.

While it was true that it was easier to work on automail if it was removed from the limb, reattaching it was incredibly painful for the wearer. There wasn’t any way around doing so if the automail was damaged or needed to be resized, but Winry was reluctant to needlessly inflict pain on someone when she didn’t know what the cause of the trouble was.

After reaffirming that nothing was amiss, Winry pulled her tools out from the automail and replaced the outer plating. Then she looked up at Milia, who was leaning over her.

“When you upgrade your automail, it can take some time to get used to it. The parts that intercept electric signals perform differently, and the materials and weight of the automail itself are different too. A lot of people feel a pretty big change compared to what they were using before. I believe that’s what you’re experiencing, but what do you think?”

The girl cocked her head before giving a little nod. “Uh, um. Now that you mention it, it feels weirdly light when I move, and I think that might have been bothering me too.”

Winry’s explanation had been easy to understand and gave Milia a possible culprit for her discomfort.

“If there isn’t anything for me to fiddle with, my taking off your foot will just hurt a lot. I’d like to keep an eye on things for a little bit longer. If things are still bad afterward, we’ll remove it and take a proper look at it then.”

Winry placed a comforting hand on Milia’s knee. The gentleness of her touch and voice eased Milia’s fears that her automail was broken, and the girl relaxed.

“Yeah, I see. I think I might have been too paranoid,” Milia said. “I’m sorry I keep bugging you about it. I know you’re busy.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t want you to feel you need to hold anything back. You can come to me with anything. Be careful on your way back!”

Milia looked apologetic at taking up Winry’s time when she hadn’t even needed any maintenance, but Winry saw the girl off with a reassuring smile to show she didn’t mind.

From behind her, she heard another customer call out, “Winry, could you take a look at this for me?”

“Yes, I’m coming!”

Winry didn’t even have time to catch her breath, but she never voiced a single complaint. She spoke to clients with a smile on her face, handling repairs and maintenance jobs alike. Garfiel appreciated Winry’s work ethic, and in return he found the time to teach her new skills.

“Winry, darling, if you could come over here?” Garfiel delicately beckoned Winry over as he repaired the automail arm of one of his regulars. “You’ve never seen this shape before, have you? We don’t get to see it often nowadays, but it was invented by a mechanic from West City in the 1890s. We have other regulars who wear this style, so make sure you remember it. Something to look out for when working with it is that it has slightly thicker supports. That makes it easier for them to rub against other parts and wear down. When that happens ... look here.”

Winry came and stood next to Garfiel; he shifted his body back and to the side to allow her a clear view of what he was doing. He then opened the outer plating on the customer’s upper arm and used a screwdriver to point at one of the components that was creaking loudly.

“You can file down this part here or replace it with another thinner but sturdy component. It’s important to be generous with the oil too,” Garfiel explained while inserting a tool between the machine parts with confident hands, swapping out what he needed to. He then used an eyedropper to apply oil. The client flexed their fingers, and the cylinders moved smoothly and soundlessly.

“You can do this on other automail joints too, when they malfunction,” Garfiel added.

“Got it!”

Winry focused all of her attention on Garfiel’s hands as he shared his wisdom freely. Winry felt her chest swell with so much joy she could almost burst.

Every day since coming to Rush Valley, she’d had the opportunity to touch prostheses she’d never seen before and was taught new skills and given more knowledge. Everything she gained was reflected in how she worked with clients and in the blueprints for Edward’s automail up in her room.

She wanted to learn more—she wanted to improve her skills. With those desires in mind, these busy days—which could have been exhausting for Winry—were instead filled with joy.

WINRY NEVER FORGOT HER LOVE of learning while she worked, which helped her rapidly improve. It still wasn’t enough, and whenever she had a spare moment she continued to study, further polishing her skills.

Later on the same day she’d looked at Milia’s foot, Winry snatched some downtime between clients to practice cutting metal sheets.

“Let’s see. When using this tool to cut metals with a higher ratio of chrome, I need to use the guide rail to keep it from curving ... like this.”

Winry sat in front of the power tool and placed a scrap of metal against its teeth. This kind of machinery was essential for making automail, and Winry had experience with a different model. The machine at the studio was larger and more precise, which also meant that it was more sensitive to even the subtlest movements made by its user, making it harder to control.

If she let up pressure even in the slightest, the teeth would grind to a halt. But pushing too hard would mean it wouldn’t cut evenly along the curve, leaving jagged edges. Winry was having a hard time getting the machine to work with her.

“Concentrate, concentrate,” Winry murmured and took a deep breath. She was surrounded by stacks of crates filled with their latest shipment of materials, which created an isolated space perfect for sharpening her focus.

When she switched on the machine, the low drone of its motor accompanied vibrations she felt through her hand while holding the metal plate steady. Careful not to let the vibrations overwhelm her, she held her breath and focused on her fingertips as she rotated the sheet. The blade and the metal ground harshly as they met, even as a graceful arc appeared on the sheet.

Winry pushed the sheet until she could no longer feel resistance from the blade, then she carefully removed it from the machine table. The machine had responded to her. With anticipation, she lifted the piece she had cut out. She was thrilled when she saw the shape she had intended.

“Yes!” She gave a little fist pump.

“Oh my, well done!”

Winry didn’t know how long he had been there, but Garfiel was peeking at her from between the stacked crates.

“You did an excellent job handling that machine. Now, let’s see it.” Garfiel accepted the plate and took a good look at it before sliding his finger along the curved edge. “Lovely, my finger doesn’t even snag on the edge. It’s perfect.”

“Really? Yes! Thank you!”

Winry clutched her hands together at her chest, openly overjoyed, and Garfiel stared, not bothering to hide how impressed he was.

“You know, you’ve really come a long way in such a short time. At this rate, you should be fine being in charge of your own clients,” Garfiel said as he leaned forward, bringing his face to Winry’s level. “Right now, we’ve got a twelve-year-old boy in the shop. You mentioned having made automail for a boy around that age, no? This is a great opportunity. Would you like to manage his case?”

“Me? *Manage*? Are you sure?”

Winry was surprised by the unexpected offer, and also a little uncertain. As an automail mechanic, she was pleased by the prospect of overseeing a client and personally handling their case from the design to the creation of the automail. At the same time, she had been told at the start of her apprenticeship that she would be doing nothing but drafting, maintenance, and repairs for a while.

Noticing her hesitancy, Garfiel's face suddenly broke out into a kind smile.

"It would have been stressful for you to manage a client before getting used to your surroundings and tools, but you've completely mastered my tools now, and you've gained quite a bit of knowledge too. You'll be fine."

"Mr. Garfiel ..."

Winry realized that Garfiel had been looking out for her to ensure that she wouldn't push herself or fail to take care of her own health after arriving in Rush Valley. She felt a belated swell of gratitude at his laid-back watchfulness for her well-being.

"Of course, in the end it's up to you. What do you say?" he asked.

When he raised his eyebrows teasingly, Winry realized that she hadn't accepted his offer yet and hastily raised her hand.

"Yes, I'll do my best! Please let me do it!" Winry stood up so suddenly that her chair clattered, and Garfiel nodded, satisfied.

"Your constant enthusiasm is one of your loveliest charms. The boy I'm entrusting to you is over there. Good luck."

Looking where Garfiel had directed, Winry saw a group of waiting adult clients and a noticeably younger boy sitting among them. This boy was to be the first client that Winry would manage at Rush Valley.

Reining in her joy and excitement, Winry dusted off the metal shavings that still clung to her person. She prepared one of the blank charts they used for brand-new customers, straightened herself, and then approached the boy.

"Hello there!" Winry called out, even more cheerfully than usual. The boy was sitting, his head tilted downward. He looked slightly annoyed as he raised his head.

"Wait a sec," Winry said. He looked slightly familiar.

The same thought apparently crossed the boy's mind. His brows furrowed as though he were trying to remember something. They simultaneously reached the same conclusion.

"We've met before."

She knew that black hair, cropped short. His dark eyes, veiled with gloom. He was on the smaller side, and he wore a white T-shirt with green knee-length shorts. It was the boy Winry had collided with on the first day of her apprenticeship. He had been looking for a prosthetics shop then, and it appeared he had yet to find one.

The boy was accompanied by his mother. The girl who had been sleeping on the mother's back the last time Winry saw them was awake today and standing on her own, her brother's crutch gripped firmly in her hand.

"Hello. I'm Karen Harling." Karen, the mother, bowed her head. Her brown, shoulder-length hair bobbed with the movement. "I'm terribly sorry about the other day. I see you're a mechanic."

"Yes, I am. I apologize for the other day as well. Am I correct in assuming that you're here today to make an automail order for your son?"

"Yes, we're looking to get custom-made automail for my son's right leg, but, ah, he ..." Karen turned her tawny eyes to the silent boy, but he didn't notice, as he was once again staring at his own feet. "I'm sorry. His name is Darish. Thank you for meeting with him."

At the sound of Karen introducing him, Darish hastily raised his head. Apparently it wasn't that he wasn't paying attention—he had just been lost in thought.

Winry didn't let his attitude bother her, and she bent at the waist and extended her hand. "I'm Winry. I'm the mechanic in charge of your automail. It's a pleasure to meet you."

But Darish only glanced at her hand and didn't take it.

"It's not like we've decided on this place," he said coldly, turning his face away from the hand presented to him.

"Darish!" Karen's voice held reproach this time.

Winry, however, simply smiled at Darish and withdrew her hand. "That's all right. You haven't put in a formal request yet, after all. I'll take your measurements to start, give you a quote, then draw up some blueprints for your plates. Then you can make a decision."

After all, there were many businesses in Rush Valley. Clients were free to choose which places to patronize. All Winry could do was give it her best.

“For now, I’m going to take your measurements, all right?” Winry said as she pulled a tape measure out of her pocket and knelt at Darish’s feet. Doing that brought her exactly to eye level with the girl standing nearby who was holding the crutch. Their eyes met.

Surrounded by unfamiliar people and tools, the girl’s eyes were wide, and Winry felt as though she were being sucked into the pupils’ dark depths. The girl’s black hair curved gently around her shoulders, and a white bow perched atop her head. She wore a sky-blue dress embroidered with small flowers along the hem that were to a little girl’s taste.

The crutch was about as tall as she was, and threatened to topple her over, yet the girl hugged it to herself with both arms. Winry paused, her hands still extended and holding the tape measure. She gave the girl a smile.

“Hello. What’s your name?”

The girl, who up till now had been excluded, immediately perked up upon being spoken to. Her face lit up with a smile as she enthusiastically answered. “Lettie!”

“Little Lettie, is it? And how old are you?”

“I’m six! I’m a *grown-up*,” the girl said, apparently displeased at being spoken to like a small child. Her petite mouth scrunched into an adorable pout.

“Can you hold on to that crutch while I speak with your mother and brother?”

“Uh-huh. I sure can!”

Holding a large, heavy crutch for an extended time should have been tough on the six-year-old, but Lettie apparently believed that doing so was her duty to her brother. She hugged it even closer. Winry wasn’t the only one who couldn’t hold in a smile at the sight of the girl’s adorable bravery, and chuckles escaped from other clients waiting nearby.

It only took a moment for the peaceful mood in their little corner of the studio to shatter.

“Don’t bother with the crutch. You can just toss it somewhere over there,” Darish said nastily. “I told you, you didn’t need to come. You’re just gonna get sleepy and conk out in the middle of things anyway.” He didn’t even give Lettie a glance as he said the cold words.

The girl’s face crumpled.

“Unh ... *sob* ...” Her eyes began to glisten, then enormous droplets welled up and fell down her cheeks.

“Why did you have to be so mean to her? Oh Lettie, don’t cry,” their mother lamented. Karen quickly pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped Lettie’s cheeks. The girl’s sobs rang out through the entire shop, drawing the eyes of Garfiel and the other shocked clients toward Winry and the family.

Darish apparently hadn’t expected Lettie to throw such a big fuss. He tsked out of annoyance. None too gently, he snatched the crutch from his little sister and leaned it against the wall.

“Mom, you can take Lettie and go back to the hotel. Her crying’s gonna bother the other people in the shop. I’m fine by myself.”

“But we need to talk about your leg,” Karen said, looking torn as she tried to soothe Lettie. Discussions about procedures and fees couldn’t move forward without the presence of an adult. At the same time, if Lettie continued to cry, it might bother others in the shop.

Seeing Karen at a loss, Winry decided to throw her a lifeline.

“Don’t worry about it,” Winry said. Meanwhile, Darish ignored the sobbing and faced any direction but toward his little sister. Winry could guess from his attitude that fights like this were common between the siblings. “All we’re doing today is taking measurements and then jotting down requests for his automail, so Darish should be able to provide those.”

Karen still looked torn between her concern for her children and her concern for those in the shop, but at Winry’s suggestion, she quickly, if hesitantly, started to leave the studio. “Winry, I’m so sorry. Darish isn’t very open in some ways. I’m sorry if he causes trouble for you, but I entrust him to your care.”

Karen kept bobbing her head in gratitude and apology as Winry showed her

out. "I'll come by again," the harried mother promised before disappearing.

When Winry turned back to the studio, she saw that Darish hadn't even looked up at his mother and sister's departure and was instead stroking the attachment of his leg prosthesis. Winry didn't know why he had snapped so harshly at his little sister, who was still so young, but she certainly didn't approve. At the same time, she wasn't about to scold a boy she'd just met, especially since she didn't know the reasons behind his actions. For now she decided to continue her task, and resettled herself at Darish's feet.

"Well then, kiddo. How about those leg measurements now?"

"It's Darish. I'm not a kid like my sister," Darish muttered, unhappy with receiving the same treatment.

"Got it. Then you can call me just Winry," she answered, before falling into silence.

Most of the clients who visited Atelier Garfiel were friendly, and Winry often enjoyed having a pleasant back-and-forth while she worked. But Darish's posture was stiff, and everything that came out of his mouth was cold and blunt.

The rest of the studio filled with cheerful chatter between Garfiel and his clients, as well as between the regulars, but silence reigned between Winry and Darish.

Winry wouldn't lie and say it was comfortable, but work was still work. She focused on the task at hand to distract her from the heavy mood and took measurements for the boy's instep, the size of his kneecap, and the placement of his hip bone. She jotted the measurements down on the paper on her clipboard, then removed the belt holding Darish's current prosthesis in order to check its specifications.

"Sorry, just going to take a look at this."

Darish's prosthesis attached above the knee, and was mostly made of a hard wooden material. Metal rods at its joints allowed some limited movement. The prosthesis was affixed to the stump of his thigh with a leather belt and metal fixtures.

When Winry removed the tightly cinched belt, she observed that the skin in contact with the prosthesis was bruised purple.

“Darish, you’re twelve, right? You look like you’ve been growing, and the size of the prosthesis isn’t quite right. When did you get this made?”

“Two years ago,” Darish responded, sounding bored, which made Winry frown slightly.

Darish was in his growth period, and his arms and legs looked like they were the right length for his age. There was no way a prosthesis from two years ago could have still fit him.

Winry placed her hand on his left leg and slowly repeated the motions of bending it at the knee and stretching it. She then stood up and circled around to his back, and from over his shirt, felt along his spine and hip bone.

She could feel that something was off through the contact on her palms. She wasn’t a doctor, but she had enough experience to know that the bones at the base of his right leg, the one with the prosthesis, weren’t in the right place. His ill-fitting prosthesis was hurting the leg it attached to, which caused him to compensate by adjusting his posture, placing extreme pressure on the base of his other leg.

If he didn’t get a replacement that fit him soon, his pain wouldn’t be limited to just his right leg, but likely his left leg and hips as well.

Winry placed the detached prosthesis on her workbench, and in an attempt to alleviate even a slight amount of Darish’s pain, she adjusted the belt and its metal fastenings before fitting it back onto him.

“It looks like this prosthesis doesn’t fit, so we should get you new automail as soon as possible. Can you tell me what you’re looking for?”

Winry pulled over a chair with a round seat from a corner of the studio and settled it in front of Darish before sitting down. She placed his chart on her lap, ready to start their discussion, when Darish’s head suddenly turned down.

“What’s wrong?” Winry asked.

Darish remained silent even as Winry peered at his face, the tip of her pen still

resting against a blank line on the chart, ready to take requests. Darish stared down at his prosthesis, his lips tightly sealed.

Winry knew that, if nothing else, she needed to get his requests for automail or she wouldn't be able to proceed. She refocused and tried again, keeping her voice light.

"For now, can you start with telling me about the kind of automail you're looking for? For example, do you want something light or something flexible? I'll make a draft based on your requests and then we'll look over it together and keep working on it until we have a leg that you're happy with."

She was met with continued silence.

"Do you have any requests?" Winry pressed.

After being urged to respond several times, Darish finally answered. "I don't."

"All right, then, let me start with what I recommend. I'll bring over some materials," Winry replied.

Darish seemed like he had been in Rush Valley for a while, so Winry had assumed that he had seen plenty of automail and already had some ideas in mind. Apparently he hadn't. When the client didn't have any requests, mechanics often offered suggestions based on the client's body and needs.

But before Winry could rise to find something she could show as an example, Darish stood up.

"I'm leaving," he said as he snatched the crutch from where it leaned against the wall and shoved it under his arm.

"What? You're leaving? Why?" Winry froze in shock, still in the process of standing up, but Darish used his crutch to swiftly make his way out of the shop. "Hey, please wait!"

Winry chased after Darish and slid in front of him to partially block his path.

"We haven't even begun talking about the automail. If you leave now, I won't be able to start drafting a design."

There was no point going to an automail shop and not talking about automail. But Darish became even more recalcitrant. His lips barely moved as he forced

out a murmur, saying, “Who cares about automail ...”

“Huh?”

Winry didn’t have the chance to ask what he meant. Darish thrust his crutch forward, shoving Winry to the side, and proceeded to leave for real. Winry could tell from the way he moved that even if she chased him, he wouldn’t stop for her.

Dumbfounded, she watched him go. All she could do was call after him with “Please come by again tomorrow!” To herself, she muttered, “I wonder what I did wrong? What a confusing kid.”

Bewildered, Winry turned back to the studio. Darish’s behavior had been completely unpredictable to her—he had been quiet one moment but was storming off in the next. Winry couldn’t help wondering if all boys his age were the same way. That wasn’t to say she was an adult, either—Winry herself was only fifteen, after all.

Winry’s childhood friend Edward was incredibly expressive with his emotions and was always straightforward. She tried to remember what he had been like at Darish’s age. When he was twelve, Edward had begun to carry heavy burdens. He had lost his arm and leg and had become a state alchemist. However, as far as she could recall, Edward had been as straightforward at twelve years old as he was now.

WORK THAT DAY didn’t end until seven in the evening.

“Take care,” waved the last customer.

“Sure thing! I’ll see you again next week.” Winry waved as the customer walked down the darkening streets. Then she began her usual closing routine. She carefully cleaned and oiled all the tools that had been dirtied by the day’s work, then brought a crate of materials inside before pulling down the shutters.

Whenever she still had work that needed to be completed before the next day, she would work overtime with Garfiel, but she was free on this particular day.

After she finished putting away everything in the studio, Winry opened the toolbox she had brought with her from Resembool. It contained a wrench, a

screwdriver, a hammer, and a ruler—all tools that she had used since she was small. Winry used a piece of cloth to carefully polish them.

Ever since arriving in Rush Valley and gaining access to the most convenient and easy-to-use tools on the market, she didn't have as many opportunities to use the things she had grown up with. Regardless, the tools embodied many memories for her and taking care of them was an essential part of bringing her day to a close.

"There, all clean!" Winry brandished the polished instruments, bringing them toward the lamp. After taking a few moments to admire the way they gleamed in the light, she placed them back in her toolbox.

"And now, we're finally done!"

After giving the furnace a final check to make sure the fire was out, she turned off the lamp.

The door at the back of the studio opened up to the stairs leading to the second floor, as well as the ground floor kitchen. Behind the sink was a small room—that was where Winry found Garfiel and two men sitting at a round table covered by a white lace cloth, drinking tea.

"Mr. Garfiel, I finished up in the studio!" Winry reported.

"Thanks for your hard work!" Garfiel replied. He had been elegantly enjoying his tea, his pinky pointing out as he held his teacup, but at Winry's announcement that their workday had officially come to an end, he placed the cup back on its saucer and gave her a smile.

The teacup was decorated with beautiful roses, and a matching teapot rested on the table, which was surrounded by matching metal chairs, the backs and armrests of which were shaped into delicate swirling curves. The entire setup seemed a bit feminine for three men at teatime, but it fit right in with the Atelier Garfiel aesthetic.

"Hey, Winry. Care for a cup?" inquired a young man in a friendly tone as he turned in his chair to drape his arm over the back. His name was Henrik, and he was the second youngest mechanic after Winry among their work acquaintances.

“Good work today,” the other man said. He was bearded and around Garfiel’s age, or slightly older. His name was Weis, and both he and Henrik were fellow mechanics running automail shops in Rush Valley.

“Good evening, Mr. Henrik and Mr. Weis!” Winry greeted the two familiar faces with a smile before plopping into the chair that Weis had pulled out for her.

“Here, for your hard work.” Henrik handed her a cup of tea he’d poured from the pot, validating Winry with a reward for her efforts.

“Thank you,” Winry said. The pot had likely been cooled, because the tea that filled the cup to the brim was cold to Winry’s touch. One mouthful and the chilled liquid seeped into her, soothing her overheated and exhausted body.

Winry loved spending time with her fellow mechanics and basking in a shared sense of satisfaction after a day of hard work. She exhaled and let herself just listen to the other three chat amongst themselves. Their conversation flowed between politics, economics, and the general state of the world, but when there was a pause, Garfiel turned toward Winry and said, “Oh, I just remembered. How did the talk with Darish about his automail go?”

“Ah, about that.” At the question, Winry drew the cup away from her lips and let out a small sigh. “He actually left before we could get anywhere.”

Winry caught Garfiel up on what had happened while explaining the situation to their fellow mechanics, who had missed the entire incident.

“... and then I asked if he had any requests for his automail, but he didn’t give me any answers, and I was kind of stuck.”

“Oh my, I see,” Garfiel said. He had been deep in conversation with one of his regulars when Darish left and had missed out on how it had all ended. He arched a single brow, surprised. “He seemed like such a well-behaved child. I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

“I asked him to come again tomorrow but, I’m sorry.”

They were running a business, and it was Winry’s job to earn the trust of their clients and contribute to the shop. She regretted that she hadn’t managed to achieve that. Garfiel, however, didn’t seem bothered, and sipped his tea.

“There’s no need to apologize, my dear. That boy, Darish, he didn’t say he was going to another shop, did he?”

“No,” Winry answered.

“Well then, I don’t see how anything has changed,” Garfiel said. “You’re still in charge of him. Until he gives you a clear rejection, all you need to worry about is how to make a lovely piece of automail for him.”

Weis had been listening in silence, but he began to stroke his beard. He asked Winry, “Was the kid Darish Harling by any chance?”

“Yes. That was his name,” Winry said. “Do you know him?”

Considering the number of people there were in Rush Valley, it was unusual to hear that a fellow mechanic had encountered the same customer. Right as Winry was being struck by what a coincidence it was, Weis let out a groan.

“Hmm, if he’s who I think he is, he might end up moving on to another shop right away.”

“You think so?” Winry asked. Darish’s mood during their entire interaction had confused Winry, but this only added to the bewilderment.

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean to make you worry.” Weis waved his hands, trying to reassure Winry as her face scrunched up, deep in thought. “That kid’s come by my place too. I think it was around a week ago. He came to get automail made, brought his mother too, but he didn’t seem too keen on it. Apparently, the place that made his current prosthesis was of the nasty sort. Didn’t bother taking proper measurements and didn’t provide any follow-up care either.”

“That’s so ...” Winry frowned.

Regardless of whether it was automail or a regular prosthesis, it was crucial to gather precise measurements to make something that fit a client’s body. Follow-ups were also essential for making adjustments to suit the client’s growth and lifestyle. Prostheses created from sloppy plans put strain on the wearer and risked warping their skeletons. In extreme cases, they could even cause paralysis.

“It seems like that’s why his leg started to hurt immediately after he got his

prosthesis. Probably still distrusts mechanics as a result. He was civil while his mother was around, but as soon as he was alone with me, he stopped cooperating. I had other jobs and couldn't just sit there with the kid, and after a while it was clear we weren't getting anywhere. He ended up leaving for a different shop."

"I see," Winry said. She had thought Darish's prosthesis seemed wrong for his size, but apparently it had never fit, even when it had been brand-new. Winry couldn't blame him for hating prosthetics mechanics if he'd been dealing with years of leg pain.

Winry recalled the awful-looking bruises on Darish's leg and tightened her grip on her teacup. As a member of the same industry, she simultaneously felt guilt and simmering outrage at the thought of a fellow mechanic treating a client so carelessly.

Winry wasn't alone in her anger. Garfiel refilled all of their cups and when he spoke, it was with quiet rage. "Some people are careless with their work like that. They're less mechanics and more like corrupt businesspeople who only care about profit. They know that people looking to buy automail usually have plenty of money prepared, so sometimes they'll drag them into their shops and force them to sign contracts, or they'll sell shoddy, overpriced automail. They won't provide any proper maintenance but *will* take the money. They're just horrid."

Garfiel was usually imperturbable, but the sudden rant betrayed his unusually strong feelings about the matter. It seemed these people truly disgusted him.

"Recently people like that have set their sights on Rush Valley itself. We've been seeing more of them, swarming like hyenas whenever they smell money. What absolutely dreadful people," Garfiel said, touching his hand daintily to his face and heaving a deep sigh.

Weis's agreement with Garfiel's assessment was clear on his face, grimacing as though he'd tasted something terribly bitter. "Absolutely. They're awful pests. They've even dragged proper businesses into their mess, trying to rip us off when they sell materials too. Not like we can say anything either, or we risk getting everything burned to the ground."

“Burned to the ground?” Winry frowned when she heard the unsettling phrase.

Henrik slammed his empty cup onto a crate with a bit more force than necessary. He looked pained as he began to explain. “Do you know that big, empty plot of land by the station? A buddy mechanic of mine used to have a shop there. They had a real strong sense of justice, too, and always stood up to those snakes. But then, in the middle of the night, there was a minor arson incident. The hustlers who’d been antagonizing my buddy got arrested almost immediately, but in the end there wasn’t enough evidence to convict them, and the guys were acquitted. My buddy couldn’t even get reparations for the store, and it went belly-up in the end.”

Winry remembered the location of the weightlifting competition she’d seen on the day she arrived for her apprenticeship. She hadn’t realized that the empty lot among the rows of stores and residences was what was left after a fire and bankruptcy.

“Can’t we expose them? And can’t the clients report to the military police that they’ve been tricked?” Winry asked. She had heard rumors about crooked businesspeople, but had never personally been involved with ones like her peers had described.

The three shook their heads in unison, chiming in.

“It’s just not possible. Even if a client claims they were threatened, the contract still has their signature. The military police can’t do anything unless they happen to be present to witness the actual blackmailing.”

“They’ve been banding together recently, which has made everything worse. I can’t stand how it’s affecting the mood in town.”

“It really is dreadful.” Garfiel voiced his displeasure alongside his friends’.

The many terrorist incidents nationwide meant there was a high demand for prostheses. And Rush Valley, blessed by the ore-rich mountains that surrounded it, was flourishing in part due to that violence. Of course, no mechanic wanted a world with endless conflict, but so long as there were those who needed prostheses, the engineers wanted a safe environment where they could provide the best products possible.

But what was perhaps most important to the mechanics of Rush Valley was their pride in the technological developments that had resulted from their friendly rivalry. The crooks who tarnished the reputation of the city were also trampling on the engineers' collective sense of honor.

"I know it's difficult to ignore, but it's best not to get involved with the likes of them. Winry, if you see any sketchy shops, promise me you'll never go near them," Garfiel said, uncharacteristically serious.

"Of course," Winry responded sincerely.

"Anyway, all we can do is show them in our own way that we're not going to take things lying down! Let's show them what we've got!" Garfiel harumphed before crossing his burly arms firmly across his chest.

"That's the plan. And we're bringing in a brand-new weapon for that," Henrik said coyly while passing Winry several sheets of paper.

Upon seeing the words emblazoned on the diagrams, Winry's eyes widened.

"I know that! It's that huge new power tool, right?"

It was a brand-new industrial-sized machine, produced by a certain famous brand. The machine, designed to both cut and polish, came with a large assortment of interchangeable blades. The blades, polishing discs, and other components were all incredibly powerful, and all of them were of higher quality than those available on the machinery currently in their shop.

"We use a variety of materials based on what the client needs when we make automail, don't we? Well, when the machines we use have limitations, we can't work with as many materials. So we decided to take the leap and ordered the latest model. The three of us, along with a few other people, pooled together our funds," her fellow engineers explained.

"That's amazing!" Winry exclaimed.

Purchasing the latest machinery through pooled investments was something that could only happen in Rush Valley. By bringing in this machine, they would be able to work with a greater range of metals and make a greater variety of automail.

Winry was filled with awe as she stroked the image of the machine on the paper with her fingertips.

“Even though it’s equipped with so many functions, there’s not a single wasteful element to it,” Winry said. “This is the brand with the president who started up his own company with the motto, ‘The most important part of crafting is good tools,’ right? He used to be a craftsman himself, and when he was ten, he became a legend by fixing a train ... Oh, I’m sorry, I got a little too worked up there, didn’t I?”

Winry giggled and tried to play it off, sticking her tongue out sheepishly. When it came to automail, she retained even the most minute bits of trivia. Garfiel and the others blinked at her. They shared looks as though asking each other, *Did you know that?* The men shook their heads at each other.

“I read about his ideologies once in the paper,” Winry continued. “He said, ‘If the screws say nothing and the cogs are silent, they’re nothing more than clumps of metal. But if the right person handles them and listens close, the screws speak and the cogs sing. And that, then, is when the automail starts to gleam with brilliant glory.’ Oh, isn’t that so romantic?”

With the diagrams pressed to her chest and her eyes closed dreamily, Winry was the embodiment of an automail nerd. Garfiel and the others desperately tried to stifle their chuckling. Paying no heed to the fact that he was smearing his lipstick, Garfiel kept his hand clamped over his mouth until Winry was done waxing poetic about the machine. Then he told her, “Yes, so we’ve decided to set up the machine here, in our shop. Winry, dear, you’ll be in charge of taking care of it. Of course, you can use it whenever you’d like as well.”

“Really?!”

Winry snapped out of her reverie at the unexpected words. Because she was still inexperienced, she hadn’t imagined getting permission to personally handle the machine. Remembering that it was both the latest model—not to mention expensive—made her slightly nervous, but her joy overruled her trepidation.

“Oh no, what should I do?! Just thinking about it is making my hands shake! Oh, what should I make?!” Winry’s eyes sparkled as she danced around, and the men were no longer able to hold in their laughter.

“Ha ha ha! Winry, you never change!” said Henrik.

“Considering you’ve got such a passionate apprentice, it won’t be long until this studio’s called Atelier Winry,” said Weis.

“Well, my goodness, you really went there. I’ve still got some fight in me yet!” Garfiel countered.

Ignoring the laughter around her, Winry once again turned her gaze to the machine on the paper.

She wanted to use this to make Darish the best automail possible. She wanted to teach him that prostheses didn’t have to cause pain, that they could be part of his body, and that they could grant him freedom of mobility. If she could accomplish these goals, perhaps that would put Darish at ease so he could have faith in prosthetics.

Winry began drafting the blueprints for Darish’s automail in her head.





CHAPTER 3

A GIANT MISTAKE



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Winry enthusiastically headed to her desk so she could use her afternoon break to work. Since Garfiel was attending to a regular in the studio, she was on her own for lunch.

“Um, so the best bolt for this joint would be ...” Winry trailed off as she scrutinized a clipboard in her left hand while holding a sandwich in her right. Then she stared down at the giant sheet of paper spread out on her desk. A breeze wafted in from an open window and tousled her hair, but that didn’t even register in her mind. “I need a twelve-centimeter wire to fit in the joint, so maybe that’ll work with a number fifty-eight screw.”

She took a bite from her sandwich. Her pencil noisily scribbled across the surface of the schematics for the automail she was designing for Darish.

“Oh, maybe I can use a fifty-eight screw over here too,” Winry contemplated with a piece of bread still between her lips. The blueprint rustled as Winry flipped up the right edge of it. There was, unsurprisingly, another automail blueprint right below. Unlike the blueprints for Darish, which were still relatively clean, the bottom blueprint had slapdash notes scrawled all over it. There were also traces of bygone writing that she had previously erased.

As she was writing the number of the screw in a corner of the schematics for Darish, there was a knock at the door of her room.

“Winry, I’m coming in! Oh my, that’s not proper of you!” Garfiel scowled when he opened the door to see Winry with the sandwich still in her mouth as

her pencil raced across the paper.

“Now that’s not a ladylike way to behave!”

“S-sahr ... sorry!” Winry quickly removed the sandwich from her mouth and apologized.

“For being so cute, you act so crudely sometimes,” Garfiel said.

“It’s just that both of my hands were occupied,” Winry said.

“Whatever am I going to do with you?” Garfiel gave her a put-upon smile.

Hee hee, Winry laughed to herself in embarrassment.



“So, there’s an errand I was just about to ask if you could run. Oh, drawing up schematics, are we?” Garfiel said. He had walked into the room and peeked at the in-progress design on the desk. “So these are the ones for Darish, then?”

“Yes. I’m still just figuring out the basic setup, but I’m going to ask if he has specific requests and then I’ll draw up the plans based on that,” Winry said, then stopped to take in a deep breath. “But he hasn’t come by.”

Darish hadn’t come back to the shop since his first visit. He hadn’t turned down her services, and she hadn’t heard of him going to another shop, so she had no idea what to do.

“Right. I suppose you can’t seal the deal, then,” Garfiel said, troubled as he pinched his chin. If Darish did formally request automail from them, they would need to procure the parts to make it. Knowing that, getting an answer from him sooner rather than later would make things easier.

After they both pondered over what to do for some time, Garfiel suddenly perked up and proposed, “Right, I know. That new tool I told you about is coming in tonight.”

“What? Is it really?!” Winry brightened, a smile forming on her face at news of the highly anticipated arrival.

“Yes, so how about you be the one to go to Darish? You’re going to make this automail using the new tool we’re getting, aren’t you?” Garfiel gently tapped the schematics with his fingertip, but smiled knowingly and murmured, “Looks like you’ve put the cart before the horse.”

Winry had been drawing up her plans with the assumption she would use the new tool from the outset. Feeling embarrassed when she realized he had seen through her, she took the shopping list from him.

“Then I’ll take you up on that. I’ll stop by Darish’s hotel while I’m out.”

Darish had told her where he was staying while she made his chart, and she knew it would be easy enough to stop by.

“If you could, I’d love for you to make him some wonderful automail that’ll show him not all mechanics are terrible. Oh, looks like you’ve selected the

materials you're using. Let's see what you have here. Let me take a look," Garfiel said with a kind look on his face as he picked up the plans in order to peruse the materials list. As he did that, another blueprint fell down from behind it.

"Oh? What's this?" Garfiel asked, looking at the plans Winry had been perpetually writing up, erasing, then rewriting. "Is this for Darish too? Looks like it's for a kid around his age."

As Garfiel read the figures that were recorded on the sheet, it seemed he had deduced that the measurements were for a person around the size of a twelve-year-old.

"No, those are for a friend," Winry said.

If Edward ever learned he had been mistaken for a twelve-year-old, he would go on a fiery rampage. Winry could almost hear him shouting, *Don't you dare call me short!* She unintentionally let out a giggle. She could practically see Alphonse, exasperated and holding Edward back while saying, *Wait, Ed, calm down.*

"Ah, so that's the childhood friend of yours you said you were making automail for. Hmm. You really are putting a lot of thought into it. He must be special to you."

"No, it's not anything like that!"

Special—when Garfiel said that word, Winry lost her cool, though she didn't know why.

As Garfiel watched Winry suddenly go from calm to panicked, he put his hand to his mouth and uttered, "Oh my. Now, this childhood friend of yours couldn't happen to also be your sweetheart, would he?"

"Not in the least bit!" Winry exclaimed.

"You're so worked up. That's so precious."

"It's not like that! There's no way I'd go out with a little runt like him!"

As she shook her head and ardently denied it, Winry felt her cheeks getting flushed from how worked up she had gotten.

“I need to go run the errands!” Winry said as she dashed out of the room, feeling an odd emotion she couldn’t quite understand. She was supposed to be angry, but for some reason, she felt embarrassed.

“Have a nice trip! Really, just can’t admit it, can she?” Garfiel said, waving his hand delicately and breaking into a smile as he watched Winry stomp down the stairs.

“SERIOUSLY, I CAN’T BELIEVE Mr. Garfiel!”

After leaving the atelier, Winry walked briskly down a road shimmering from the heat haze. Since Winry and the Elric brothers were childhood friends, she was regularly teased about Edward, though she would bluntly deny there was anything between them whenever that subject came up. She couldn’t understand why, but the earlier exchange had shaken her to an extent that was surprising even to her.

However, it was true that the thought of the Elric brothers tenaciously working toward their goal somewhere right now brought out her urge to work harder too. The two brothers who inspired her courage really were special to her in a way that couldn’t be summarized by childhood friendship.

“But they’re *just* friends! It’s always been that way, ever since we were small!” she said, almost as though she were trying to convince herself of something. Winry walked even faster, as if to shake off the strange agitation that had overtaken her, right as ...

“Waaaaaah!”

She heard a child cry from a side street. Winry stopped in her tracks and looked over in that direction.

“Wonder what’s going on?”

She switched directions and peered around the corner to find that a small crowd had gathered in front of a street stall. A small girl sat at its center.

“Lettie!” Winry exclaimed.

The sobbing girl was Darish’s little sister. It seemed she had taken a tumble and brought down a shelf of merchandise with her. The metal scraps from a

salvage of some sort or other had scattered and fallen into the sand.

“You think you can just waltz over here and break my precious merchandise?” yelled a large, menacing man who appeared to be the owner of the stall.

“I can’t believe anyone’d pick a fight with a small child,” someone in the crowd said.

“That guy set up shop at another street yesterday and picked fights then, too,” said another.

Despite their commentary, the onlookers only shot sympathetic glances from afar when faced with the red-hot threat the large man posed. They offered no help.

“The parts you just broke cost a hundred eighty thousand cens! You go and get that money from your parents!” the man roared.

“Excuse me!” Winry quickly threw herself in front of Lettie just as the man seemed like he was about to raise his hand against the girl.

“Oh, Winry!” Lettie’s eyes opened wide in surprise, but then she started sobbing even louder, almost as though in relief at Winry showing up to help. Winry stroked the sobbing girl’s heaving back and faced down the man.

The man loomed over Winry with a dubious look as she stood in his way. “Who the hell are you? You the kid’s sister or something?”

“Aren’t you ashamed? How could you threaten a little kid like her?!” Winry said indignantly, not backing down despite the man’s far taller stature. Lettie shouldn’t have broken the merchandise, but he had gone too far phrasing things as though he was going to extort her.

But the man didn’t even seem apologetic.

“Hah!” he snorted. “I’m the one who’s the victim here—my merchandise was broken! What are you going to do about that?!”

As though to shove her mistake in her face, the man thrust one of the broken wares at Lettie. It appeared to be an automail piece that started at the elbow, judging by the five finger-like appendages that flopped around.

“I just said to stop that!” Winry stood in front of Lettie, hiding the girl behind

her back, but when her eyes fell on the automail, she cocked her head to the side.

“Did you really break this, Lettie?” she asked, unable to hide her doubt, which made a grin break over the man’s face.

“Ain’t that what I’ve been saying? Then how about you cough up the dough to cover the price tag, huh?”

“Are you sure it wasn’t broken from the start?”

“What did you—” the man choked up.

“Thought so.”

Salvaging and reselling automail itself was a respectable trade. As long as the automail was still functioning, it could be tuned up and reattached; if it was broken, it could be disassembled for parts. The exorbitant price the man was demanding was well within a range that should have guaranteed functioning automail.

However, after looking at the automail in the man’s hands and the parts scattered on the ground, Winry could see that they were pieces of junk that had been broken all along.

“That automail wouldn’t be operational even if you attached all the parts on the ground to it. The driving mechanism’s metal clasp is crushed and the joints are so old that they’re rusted. Considering all that, don’t you think you’re charging a bit too much for it?” Winry said. Her assessment would have been impossible without a close inspection for most inexperienced mechanics, but the piece’s condition hadn’t escaped Winry.

“B-but she still damaged my merchandise. It’s filled with sand cuz she knocked over the shelf!”

“Then we can solve that by cleaning it.”

A satisfied, bold smile broke out on Winry’s face as she pulled out an array of tools that filled both her hands.

The man’s eyes opened wide in shock. He was probably wondering who this fifteen-year-old girl was that she regularly carried a whole set of tools on her

person. Lettie and the onlookers who observed the course of events from afar could only watch as Winry's adroit hands moved.

Winry was showered in stares as she snatched the automail from the man's hands, unscrewed the casing, and using a screwdriver, swept away the grit that had worked its way inside. Next, she rolled her shopping list into the shape of a thin straw and blew out the sand that had collected. She slotted the scattered parts into the appropriate places. As a finishing touch, she substituted the bolt of the driving mechanism, which had been crushed from the start, with another part that wouldn't obstruct the automail's functions.

"There, I don't think you can complain about that. It's fixed now, so make sure you take care of it," Winry said.

It probably hadn't taken her ten minutes. She'd even polished the automail until it was gleaming before returning it to the dumbfounded man's hands. Then Winry led Lettie down and out of the side road by the hand. After Winry's show of wonderful dexterity, the man and the spectators watched her leave with their mouths agape.

Winry and Lettie escaped past the ring of people and walked for a while before Winry had them stop at a small plaza with a fountain. She sat Lettie down on the bricks that surrounded the fountain and used the sleeve of her jumpsuit to wipe away the traces of tears on Lettie's face.

"That was scary, wasn't it?" Winry said. "But you're fine now. Where're your mom and brother?"

"I lost them," Lettie said, downcast.

"Where did you lose them? Let's find them together."

"Near the bank. Mom said she was getting money for the automail ready, but then Darish suddenly said he didn't need a new leg. I was waiting right next to them, but there were lots and lots of people and I got separated. And then I fell down in front of that shop." Recalling the frightening ordeal brought tears to the girl's eyes again.

"I see, so that's what happened. At least you're fine now. Let's go find your mom and brother together, okay?" Winry said as she stroked the girl's head. At

that moment, someone called out Lettie's name. When they looked over, Darish had just made his way into the plaza.

"Lettie! Where were you?! Oh, it's *you*."

Darish, hobbling over on his crutch, noticed Winry was standing next to his sister. A suspicious look came over his face and he said, "Why are you here?"

"I just happened to pass by right when she was getting into trouble with a man at a stall," Winry replied.

"She got in trouble?" Darish scowled and looked down at Lettie. There was obvious worry in his eyes and concern for his little sister. However, the next moment, the words that came out of his mouth were shockingly stern and in complete contrast to his expression.

"You dummy!"

Lettie's shoulders trembled at her brother's unforgiving tone.

"You got in trouble? What did you do?!" he continued.

"But ... but there were so many people and they pushed me ... and then I ended up somewhere strange!"

"That's why you shouldn't have come! This town is too busy! Hurry up and go home to stay with dad!"

"Ugh ... waaah!" Lettie sobbed at being shouted at, tears rolling down her face again even though she'd just finished crying.

"H-hey, you didn't have to say it like that!" Winry said as she put herself between the siblings, which made Darish, who had just been about to say something, purse his lips quietly. Something similar had happened at the studio, but this time, Darish had gone overboard with his biting words.

"Lettie! Darish!"

They heard another voice from the edge of the plaza. Karen came running over, out of breath.

"Thank goodness! I heard people in the neighborhood saying that a girl who looked like you was crying, so your brother and I split up to find you. You

weren't at the hotel, and I was so worried. What a relief!"

"Apparently Lettie got herself in trouble. And then *she* supposedly saved her," Darish said brusquely as Karen firmly hugged the bawling Lettie.

"Well, thank you very much, Winry. I'm so sorry for the trouble," Karen said and bowed her head to Winry.

"Not at all. That wasn't trouble in the slightest," Winry said and quickly waved both her hands. But then Karen once again looked apologetic.

"And I'm sorry about Darish too. You were right in the middle of talking about plans when he walked off and left it at that. I'm sure that must have put you on the spot because he's refused to come by again, right? I feel terrible asking you for this after causing you trouble, but regarding the automail, is that still ... ?"

After investing time consulting at so many shops only to have agreements fall through every time, Karen seemed worried that she would end up repeating the process with Winry.

"No, it's fine. I need to procure the parts soon, so it would be very helpful to move the conversation along. You're welcome to come back—I wouldn't turn you away."

"I see, what a relief," Karen replied as a genuinely reassured smile formed on her face. "Then shall we make a visit to the shop right away? What do you think, Darish?"

Like any parent, Karen was worried about her son's future. Despite Darish's reservations, she likely wanted to get him automail as soon as possible, even if it was just a day sooner.

However, true to form, Darish fought her on it.

"I'm not going."

He set himself up on his crutch again and turned around as though trying to shake himself free from his mother's gaze.

"Darish!" Winry called to stop him, knowing that if she let him leave now it would just be a repeat of their previous encounter. She wanted to nudge the conversation forward, even if only fractionally. Darish suddenly lost his balance

and started to tumble to the right.

“Hgh!”

His prosthetic leg had gotten caught on the stone pavement and his crutch had fallen from his hand.

“That was close!”

Winry and Karen had both instantly run to him and supported him together.

“Ouch!” Darish’s face twisted with pain while he was held up between their two sets of hands. The belt of his prosthesis had contorted and applied pressure to his thigh. His scars and bruises were exposed from where the belt had shifted.

When Lettie saw the painful scars, she stopped crying and wanted to help her brother too.

“Darish,” she called in a hesitant voice, but he didn’t even turn to look at her. All he did was click his tongue at her in annoyance.

“Karen, um, he needs his prosthesis reattached anyway and we can talk about the automail here, so would you leave us alone for a bit?” Winry cautiously proposed. Darish seemed annoyed just from Lettie’s presence. If they stayed in the same spot together, it was likely that he would say something awful to Lettie and hurt her feelings again. Talking to Darish alone seemed the more prudent course of action at the moment.

Karen hesitated for a bit, but she seemed to realize her son’s irritation. She signaled agreement with her eyes, then bowed and left the plaza with Lettie.

Once they were alone, Winry lent Darish her shoulder and sat him down on the fountain’s rim.

“Ouch.” Darish’s face contorted in pain. It seemed that the joint of his prosthesis might have scraped him.

Winry kneeled directly onto the ground and placed her hands on Darish’s right leg to carefully remove the prosthesis. The bruises from the prosthesis had grown even larger than when she had previously seen them.

“It looks like this leg is a bad fit. I really think you should replace it soon,” she

said, keeping her tone measured as she pushed the twisted belt back into place with the tips of her fingers and fixed the half-undone fastenings.

Darish kept silent for a while as he rubbed his leg, but he eventually ground his teeth, seeming bitter.

“Damn it. If that carriage just hadn’t toppled over, this wouldn’t be happening!” he said as he bit his trembling lip. Darish glared at the adjusted belt and metal fastenings for a moment, but then a weary look gradually overtook him.

“Two years ago, a carriage that happened to pass by me fell over. I’m not sure if a wheel came off or if the horse got spooked, but what I do remember clearly is the cart coming down on me.”

As he haltingly spoke, his eyes seemed to look beyond his right leg into the empty air, as though he were searching for his long-gone limb.

“I got this prosthesis right after I lost my leg. But it just wouldn’t fit right. My mom and dad told me it was their fault for not choosing a good shop and that they’d find me one that was actually good next time. They brought me to Rush Valley, but ... Hey, did I tell you where we live?”

When he asked her that, Winry paused from her work and shook her head.

“No, where’s that?”

“It’s even farther north than West City.”

“That’s a long way from here.”

“Yeah.”

The country of Amestris was roughly circular. Rush Valley was in the south and the town Darish came from was in the distant north.

“My dad’s working from morning to night just to afford my automail fee and the living expenses. He told me to get the best engineer in Rush Valley to make one for me. My mom’s planning for a long stay and she said she wanted to go back home to get stuff, but ...”

As Winry listened to Darish’s pained voice while he spoke about his family, she understood what he was trying to say—that he felt guilty for the money

they were spending. Despite that, Darish had still delayed getting his automail. As she realized the reason for that, Winry said out loud, “You don’t trust mechanics?”

“Yeah,” Darish answered.

He was so sure that he hadn’t hesitated to answer. Winry doubted she could easily overcome that distrust. Regardless of that, she carefully chose her words as she looked up at Darish. “I think you must have been through terrible things with the prosthetic leg you have now, but you’ll be much more mobile with automail that’s been properly designed for you. You’d even be able to run and jump. The leg you have now is putting a strain on your body, but I’ll be sure to make one that fits you perfectly. I promise.”

Darish stared back at Winry, looking serious.

“What would a leg that fits me perfectly be like?”

“Huh?”

“Is automail really that great?”

When Darish questioned her, Winry assumed he was showing interest and gave him an enthusiastic nod. She could go on forever about the benefits of automail—especially if doing so would restore Darish’s trust in prostheses in the slightest. That thought filled her with self-confidence.

“Automail needs to be adjusted several times for the wearer as they grow, but you’ll have the flexibility to have any leg you want. Depending on the mix of metals, you’ll be able to change its weight and properties. I even know someone who has weapons hidden in hers. What kind of leg would you like, Darish?”

“I don’t need it to be able to do anything special ...” he trailed off.

“So you want something simple. Since you seem like you’re pretty active, what would you think of something that has a wide range of movement at the joint? And it might be good to make it out of sturdy materials that won’t have any give even if something happens. If you don’t like the leg, you could even switch it with a different one.”

“Sounds like automail can do anything,” Darish said, responding with something like a smile at Winry’s purposefully bright tone before continuing. “So then, could you make a leg the same as my original one?” His voice became terribly cold and monotone, and that smile turned resentful. He wasn’t sneering, exactly—his expression was too muted for that kind of active malice. “So I can have whatever leg I want? And I can switch it out just like that? Why is that all anyone ever talks about? It’s not an automail leg I want. I just want *my* leg back.”

His gaze became filled with anger as he stared her down. His tone and what he was saying overpowered her.

“I lost consciousness while I was under the carriage, and by the time I woke up, my leg was gone. I still can’t believe it. But you, the doctors, and the other mechanics just keep telling me there are other legs out there! You’re all so full of yourselves, telling me that you can make me a new one!”

He aggressively snatched away the prosthesis Winry held and threw it on the ground. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“No leg’s going to fit me like my original one. I can’t just replace it! Don’t you dare tell me I can just switch out my leg! Nothing’s better than my original leg! Why don’t you get that?!”

His shoulders heaved from his ragged breathing. Even though he aggressively wiped away his tears, he couldn’t stop crying. Big, wet tears splattered to the ground. Darish took a deep breath, then continued in a quivering voice, “Lettie’s such a crybaby. She’ll fall right over or get lost and sob on the spot. That’s why I’d always run to her side and help her. I protected her.”

“Darish,” Winry said, frozen. She could only watch as his large tears welled up and spilled over.

“When we were coming to Rush Valley, I told Lettie to stay home, but she came anyway. She followed me like she always does. But she can’t keep doing that, not when I can’t save her anymore!”

Winry at last realized the real reason why Darish was irritated with his little sister.

He had been cold to Lettie while she held his crutch because he was irritated at himself for being a burden. When he had heard that she'd gotten caught up in trouble, he had looked worried even while shouting at her because he was angry at himself.

There was no sibling rivalry between them. He was just frustrated that he wasn't able to protect her like he had in the past, and by how that reality had been forced on him.

He sobbed as he said in an increasingly heated tone, "I was proud of my leg. I knew I could trust my leg to be fast in taking me to her. There isn't any other leg like it. You didn't even know that, so don't tell me you can give me a leg better than my original one!"

His emotional outburst rendered Winry speechless.

Back when Darish had run into Winry on the road, he hadn't been distracted by the weightlifting competition—he'd been watching the other kids running freely. The reason why he had been so absorbed in thought and forgotten to even say hello when he had come to the shop was because he had been preoccupied with memories of his original leg.

After getting all his long-pent-up feelings off his chest, Darish once again wiped his face. This time his tears stopped for good. To Winry, it felt almost as though it were the moment he fully closed off his heart, having given up hoping that anyone would understand him.

Darish left Winry, who was still frozen on the spot, and moved over to his fallen prosthesis. He wordlessly put it on. He dragged his deadweight leg and left the plaza behind, his small form disappearing into Rush Valley's clamor.

Even though Darish had left, his words echoed in Winry's mind.

"I can't believe I said something so insensitive," Winry said, turning pale and slumping onto her butt on the spot.

Darish hadn't simply been distrustful of mechanics or the prosthetic leg that had hurt him. He had been wounded by everyone's insensitive attitudes as they had enthusiastically boasted about their skills and focused solely on telling him the benefits of prostheses.

It was because he'd had such a hard time until now that she had wanted to give him the best automail there could be. Despite her intentions, Darish had only seen the many things she had said as a dismissal of his original leg. What Winry should have done was try to understand Darish's feelings about losing his leg. She should have started by listening to him.

Winry clenched her fists in the gravel, the sand crunching in her palms.

"I forgot to consider my client's feelings," she said.

Winry's many customers floated into her head.

There was Milia, who had asked Winry to remove her automail for inspection. There was Kaas, who had been worried about how his automail's maintenance would change. Winry could think of all kinds of other examples. She had said so many things to so many customers, like, "This right here is a great part." "If it doesn't work out, then I can adjust it for you." "It'll hurt a little, but it'll heal up right away."

She had done what she had thought was the best in each circumstance, thinking that would satisfy her clients, but had it in actuality? Milia had looked worried. And Kaas had been very hesitant until he had made a decision, hadn't he?

"They were anxious, but I ..."

Winry took a deep breath as though she were trying to relieve herself of even a slight amount of the weight of the heavy emotions that burdened her. All she could manage was a faint, trembling gasp.

In Resembool, she hadn't had the means, knowledge, or materials she had access to now. Regardless of that, she could say with confidence that she had thrown her whole self into her work. She had regularly racked her brains thinking about where someone's automail might hurt and what concerns the wearer might have to ensure they would be happy.

However, she had gradually replaced that care with new techniques, knowledge, and materials. Though none of those things could be used as substitutes, she had mistakenly believed she could compensate with whichever she had most of at the time.

All she had seen was the joy of things that had once been out of her reach—of introducing clients to materials she had never been able to procure before and being able to do things that had been impossible for her in the past. Winry was aghast to find that she had been so focused on those things that she'd lost the ability to do something that had once come to her so naturally.

“ . . . ”

After slowly standing up, Winry forced herself to run her errands on heavy feet, then headed back to Atelier Garfiel.

She found the new electrical tool she had been impatiently waiting for had been delivered to the studio. As she looked at the brand-new machine sparkling in the setting sun, she had mixed feelings. She had been so convinced that if she just had this tool and could create an incredible piece of automail, she would have the key to making Darish happy.

She was embarrassed for ever having had such a silly thought.





CHAPTER 4

A CHAIN OF MISTAKES



GARFIEL WAS THE FIRST to notice a difference in how Winry worked.

“Good morning, Winry. Wait, don’t tell me you stayed up all night again?!”

Garfiel, who had woken up at his usual time, blinked in surprise when he saw the atelier’s workbench.

Normally, the bench was set up first thing in the morning with the automail they would work on and the polished tools they would need that day. However, the usually tidy work area was strewn with swapped-out parts, screws, and grease-stained tools.

“Good morning! I’m finishing up, so I’ll open the shutters right after!” Winry gave him a smile and returned his greeting in the middle of repairing some automail. She went right back to screwing in the final bolt.

“Did we receive an overnight job yesterday evening?” Garfiel said, cocking his head to the side in puzzlement, before realizing Winry was working on automail that a client had brought in the day before. Dubious, he asked, “Weren’t we just changing out the screw in the joint for this one?”

Winry replied breezily as though nothing were amiss, “That’s what I’d been planning, but the customer was concerned one of the internals was warped and apparently he’s coming back at around noon, so I thought I’d get it done before we open.”

“You don’t have to accept work with tight time constraints and tough conditions. Just the other day, you ended up with another complex job and had

to pull an all-nighter then, too.” Garfiel seemed half-exasperated.

In front of him but not looking up, Winry finally finished her work and put down her screwdriver.

“Whew, I’m done. Okay, time to get ready to open shop!”

She wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. Without even stopping for a break, she drew water into a bucket. She had already finished doing routine maintenance on the devices and tools late the night before, so all she had left was cleaning the floors.

“My stars,” Garfiel shrugged when she didn’t show any hint of fatigue and diligently went to work sweeping the floors with a broom. “First, take a shower. I don’t approve of you being filthy before we even open up.”

“Huh?”

Winry blinked and looked down at herself. She hadn’t realized until that moment that she was covered in sweat and oil from head to toe.

“I’m sorry! I’ll get cleaned up right away!” she said. She couldn’t meet customers while looking like that—it would be rude. Winry rushed up the stairs and dashed into the bathroom.

As the lukewarm water washed over her, she scrubbed at her skin with soap. Metal shavings and blackened bubbles flowed down the drain.

“Whoa, I really was filthy! I’m so glad I finished in time!” she exclaimed as she scrubbed herself clean, loudly splashing water as she celebrated that she’d finished the earlier maintenance without issue.

Winry was firmly committed to hearing out each and every client she met. Since she knew now that she’d been inconsiderate of Darish’s feelings, she had reflected on her work and decided to prioritize her client’s feelings going forward.

After showering and changing, Winry gazed out the window as she ate breakfast. The smoke puffing out of smokestacks all over the city signaled the start of what would be a hectic day.

“Hope my work will satisfy the clients!” she said in order to remind herself of

what she'd resolved to do. She slapped her cheeks to fire herself up.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE SHOP OPENED, the owner of the automail she had barely finished servicing stopped by.

"Morning. I'm sorry for coming in early. Could you reattach the leg I brought to you yesterday, by any chance? I found out that I have a last-minute trip I need to make for work. Have you finished the repairs?"

"Yes, and I looked at all the internal mechanisms. There weren't any problems at all. I'll reattach it now, so if you could please come this way."

Winry nodded and offered a chair as the suit-wearing man's eyes went wide. Though he had come in the day before, it had been right at closing time. Despite his request, the man was aware that dismantling an automail's internal components would have taken time.

"The internal mechanisms?" the man said with an apologetic look in his eyes as Winry set about pulling off the prosthetic leg he'd worn in place of his automail. "You don't mean you looked at *all* of them, do you? But it's only been a day. You must have stayed up all night. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Winry said. After she finished pulling off the leg with a clunk, Winry brought over the automail. "Okay, shall I reattach it now?"

She leaned over his legs, put a wrench to the bolt of the joint and held it firmly.

"Are you ready? One, two, three!"

"Guh!" When he felt the pain and jolt from his nerves connecting, the man groaned a little. "Ha ha, I just can't ever seem to get used to that, no matter how long it's been."

He smiled sheepishly, seeming embarrassed for crying out unintentionally at his age.

"How is it? None of it feels sluggish when you move it, right?"

"No, the exterior screw is perfectly fit in there, so it's not making that strange noise. There's no problem with it."

He stood up and stretched his leg, then took a few steps and smiled in

satisfaction.

“I have a big business negotiation in another town, but because you took such a good look at my leg, it won’t be distracting me and I’ll be able to focus on my work. I’m grateful, truly.”

After he settled the bill, as he left to go to work, Winry saw him out, calling, “Thank you so much!” The morning sunlight stung her sleep-deprived eyes so much it hurt, but Winry didn’t mind it at all.

Kaas came by that afternoon.

“Hello, Winry. I came to see your schematics.”

“Welcome, Mr. Kaas. Please take a seat over here. Umm, your schematics are ...”

Winry searched for the two blueprints in a box filled with rolled-up papers, then spread only one of them over the table initially.

“This is the one we spoke about earlier that would be made using new materials,” Winry said as she pointed at the knee on the diagram. She had selected materials designed so they could be made thinner using the latest techniques in order to fulfill Kaas’s request for lighter automail. “This part as well as that part will be three millimeters thinner than before.”

“What are these lines that form a cross here?”

“Since it’s thinner, we’ll put in thin metal rods as reinforcements,” Winry explained. “This is a diagram of it from the back. It will be fifteen percent lighter than the automail you’re currently using.”

As he listened to her explanation, Kaas followed the diagram with his eyes and nodded firmly as though to indicate that he didn’t have any issue with that figure.

“That’ll be such a help. Looks like the only thing left is for me to learn how to take care of it, and that should be it,” he said, his voice quieting slightly. Though he had agreed to the new automail, he still seemed concerned about maintenance.

“About that, would you be kind enough to look at this?”

Winry spread out another sheet of paper. It was a blueprint for another piece of automail that would be lighter than the automail he had now, but that required the same care as his current leg.

“You told me that you were worried about having a different maintenance routine, so I found another type of material. But it will be slightly more expensive than the other one.”

“Oh, you went out of your way to make a second design?” Kaas seemed surprised as he leaned forward and looked at the blueprints.

“Yes. I can’t make it as light as the one I just showed you, but you’ll be able to care for it in the same way you have been.”

“Oh ho, looks like the screw here is a different shape.”

“Yes, I can’t make the body any lighter, so I thought I’d lighten the parts instead.”

Winry pulled off a screw that was taped to the edge of the blueprint and offered it to him. It was handmade. Since carving it was labor-intensive, the metal was normally not used for making delicate parts, but she had practiced using the new machine to make it.

After she finished explaining the two designs, Winry laid them out side by side on the table.

“What do you think?” Winry asked.

She didn’t mind whichever Kaas chose. What mattered was that she had prepared plans that fit his desired conditions, and that he chose one.

“I suppose I’ll choose this one,” he said, pointing at the blueprint that would allow him to keep his current maintenance routine.

“Understood. Then I’ll produce this one for you,” Winry replied. She drew a large circle over the blueprint that he had chosen.

“I’m counting on that,” Kaas said. As he stood up from his chair and was just about to leave, he stopped in his tracks. “So, why did you prepare two blueprints for me?”

“Because,” Winry stopped rolling up the schematics as she explained. “You’re

the one who'll need to maintain your automail every day, Mr. Kaas, so I thought I'd better make something that prioritizes what you want. Also, it would make me happy to know that you're using your automail and taking care of it in the long term. The best way to make that possible is to make it easier to maintain."

"I see."

The corners of his eyes crinkled as though he were squinting at a bright light, but the hand he gently placed on Winry's shoulder as he passed by expressed his gratitude. His large, rugged hand on her shoulder brought warmth to Winry's heart.

When Winry judged there was an afternoon lull in the stream of clients coming in, she called out to Garfiel, who was servicing a regular's automail. "Mr. Garfiel, could I go out for a bit? I checked every bit of Milia's automail, so I'd like to go reattach it for her."

The day before, Winry had visited Milia's house and taken the girl's automail. After a scrupulous inspection, it seemed that the issue Milia had complained about had indeed been imagined. Winry wanted to tell Milia that as soon as possible.

"You're going all the way to her house?" Garfiel said, stopping in the middle of applying oil to a customer's automail. He looked doubtful. As a general rule, Atelier Garfiel didn't pay home visits for automail servicing.

Winry said, "I just thought she'd have trouble coming all the way here on a substitute leg she's not used to."

Milia's house was partway across the other side of the mountains with the heart of the town in between, so she would need to travel up steep stairs and over inclines. Winry had been the one to take the girl's automail, so she wanted to do what she could for Milia.

"I understand that, but more importantly, are you sure you'll be fine without getting some sleep?" Garfiel questioned, pointedly looking at the bags under Winry's eyes. "It's a lovely thing that you're taking such good care of the clients, but there's no point if it means sacrificing your own health in return."

At Garfiel's somewhat stern warning, Winry replied, "I'll be fine! I've always

been tough, ever since I was small!”

When Winry brought her firmly balled fists up to her chest as an apparent show of just how tough she was, Garfiel sighed. He didn’t know what else to do.

Winry’s skills at work seemed to be improving and she had a very good reputation with the customers. But if she kept pushing herself, that stress would eventually manifest. That wouldn’t only negatively affect her ability to concentrate and her problem-solving skills—she would lose her ability to consider those around her as well. The shelf and floor, and most importantly the old tools from Resembool that Winry had been so attentive to at the outset were starting to collect dust. As the one with more experience, Garfiel started to warn her to be careful of that: “So, Winry ...”

However, before he could get anywhere, they heard the voice of the man from the studio next door.

“Hey! Get those boxes you’ve got in the road cleaned up already!”

“Oh, sorry!” Winry replied. She hurried out to the front, her footsteps thudding as she went. “I’ll clean them up right away!”

“You’ve even blocked the way into my shop. Bring your shipments in as soon as they arrive,” the man chided.

Winry had been planning to haul everything into the studio after confirming that all the parts they had ordered had been delivered, but she hadn’t had time that day and had left them out. She now brought in both of the large boxes at the same time, placing them down in the studio with a weighty thump. She didn’t even check their contents before she heaved the box containing Milia’s automail and some tools onto her shoulder.

“I need to go before it gets too late! Well, I’m heading out!”

“Oh, wait ... !”

Winry’s hair fluttered as she smiled and ran off, Garfiel’s call to stop her falling on deaf ears.

ONCE WINRY WAS OUT OF THE STUDIO, she made a beeline to Milia’s house.

When she looked up at the clock over at the edge of town, its big hand had

just ticked to point at three o'clock. The large mechanical clock, apparently created by automail engineers living in the town as a way for everyone to keep the time, was outfitted with an arm holding a hammer and a bell on top. Every hour on the hour the arm would come alive and swing the hammer up to strike the bell and toll out the hour.

The bell rang out three times overhead, informing those who worked in the town of the time.

"It feels like it barely struck twelve just earlier," Winry mused. "I can't believe how fast the time has flown by."

By the time she would get back to the studio, it would probably already be five o'clock. After that, she was planning on drawing up provisional schematics for some new clients and checking on the automail maintenance she had finished the day before.

Winry kept a firm hold on the automail she carried as she quickly wove between people.

She had been incredibly busy the past few days, but she had started seeing her clients smile a lot more than before. All her efforts were paying off in results. Those satisfied smiles and the trust in her clients' eyes as a result of her work and painstaking care were what brought her joy—they were what motivated her.

As she ran along, feeling a pleasant sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, she heard a familiar voice coming from somewhere.

"Um, so I want a chocolate cookie and orange juice and also, uh ..."

She turned her head to find Lettie and Darish ordering off a menu in front of a roadside stall. The large, roofed cart served juices made from vegetables and fruits, as well as muffins, cookies, and other snacks. Though it served alcohol and bar snacks at night, it often sold chilled drinks during the hot afternoons.

Winry stopped in her tracks to watch the two from behind. The street and passersby separated her and the children.

She hadn't seen Darish since that day. He hadn't visited her and she hadn't had the guts to go see him. But she had been hoping for another chance at a

conversation with him, if she could get one. Barring that, she at least wanted to apologize to him. Though she'd been dreading this, the smiles of her clients from the past few days spurred her to approach him.

Darish was preoccupied with his thoughts, leaning against the stall while on his crutch. Lettie was looking at the menu and trying her hardest to get a response from him, but he wasn't paying attention in the slightest.

Winry mustered up her courage and called out, "Darish?"

Hearing her voice, Darish sprung up and turned around.

"Oh, it's you!" Lettie said when she realized who was there. She leapt onto Winry, who accepted the small girl with open arms while she looked straight at Darish.

Darish immediately averted his eyes.

"Hello," Winry said, but he put his elbow on the counter and kept his head turned away without returning the pleasantries. He seemed to want to have nothing to do with her. That stung. Lettie innocently looked up at her.

"Did you come to buy juice too? I got orange juice and Darish got apple juice. We're gonna eat chocolate cookies too."

"And what did you order for your mom?" Winry asked with a small smile as she tried to endure the stabbing pain in her heart from Darish's cold reaction. That was the point when Darish decided to finally say something.

"Our mom went home. She's coming back the day after tomorrow, though."

"I see." Winry had been told that their father had stayed behind and was alone in their house, which was far from Rush Valley. Karen had likely headed back temporarily in order to check on her husband and the state of their home. While Winry processed the information, Darish kept avoiding her eyes and shifted away from the counter.

"You're here to buy something too, right?" he assumed.

"No, I'm not," she said, her hands waving in the negative, which made Darish let out an indifferent hum between a sigh and a reply.

Though it hadn't been much of one, they'd successfully had a conversation.

Winry felt like the heavy atmosphere between them had begun to clear, even if only slightly. She once again faced Darish, standing right in front of him.

She knew exactly what she wanted to say to him.

“I’m sorry for earlier.” She bowed her head low. “I was convinced that if I learned the right techniques for creating the best automail possible, that was all I needed to make my clients happy. But that assumption hurt you. I’m really sorry.”

She kept her head bowed with genuine sincerity. Her hair swept down and spilled from behind her back, fluttering to the sides of her face.

When she raised her head after some time, Darish was scowling suspiciously at her. Lettie, who had no idea what had led to this, looked from Darish to Winry with wide eyes.

“I’m listening to clients now,” Winry continued, “and I’m making sure I communicate with them so that I can consider their feelings when I do my job. There are times when I still don’t get things right, but I’m making sure that I never forget to be considerate.”

Darish didn’t seem to have more to say after spilling his guts to her a few days earlier—he leaned on the counter and remained silent. He no longer looked so dubious of Winry’s intentions. She couldn’t tell if that was because he was willing to hear her out or if it was because he had already lost interest in what she had to say, so she earnestly continued, saying, “I’ve started to see smiles on my clients’ faces more often. I think that’s because you showed me where I was wrong, Darish. So I’d like you to let me look at your leg again, if possible. I won’t force you, of course, but if you feel like you’d be willing to talk with me again, please come by the shop. This time I’ll make sure I’m listening to you.”

Once she had told him exactly how she felt, Winry bobbed her head one more time. Then she gave Lettie, who was looking puzzled, a tender pat on the head and turned away.

Winry didn’t look back as she walked off. The sound of mechanics hammering away and shopworkers soliciting customers surrounded her. There were plenty of mechanics around and she was just one of those many. She prayed for Darish to choose her again from among all those others as she quickly climbed the

steep hill to Milia's house.

She didn't think that a single conversation was enough to bring Darish to forgive her. However, if she got one more chance, she would work incredibly hard in order to not let him down again. The last thing she wanted was to hear him say *"I knew it'd never happen."* She once again resolved to make every effort she could for her clients and to spend even more time than ever before on her work.

But taking on everything in that way would inevitably come with strain. Had she been an experienced adult, she might have been able to find balance, but at fifteen years old, Winry only knew how to throw her entire self at a problem.

Slowly but surely, though Winry was unaware, the toll of taking on too much had compounded.

WITH MILIA'S GRATITUDE AND SMILE still fresh in her mind, Winry rounded the corner to the studio.

"Winry!"

When she searched for the person who had called her name, Winry found an older man standing on the other side of the road.

"Mr. Pollack?"

Pollack, whose right eye was automail, was a regular at Atelier Garfiel. He had been leaving maintenance up to Winry more recently.

"Hello!" Winry greeted him with a light bow like she always did whenever she passed a familiar face on the road, but this time her politeness was met with Pollack calling to stop her in a somewhat rude tone. "Hey, Winry, haven't you got something to say to me?"

"Huh?"

The normally mild-mannered Pollack looked irate. Winry tried to think of what he could have meant or what she could have done to cause that look on his face, but nothing immediately came to mind.

Then Pollack beckoned Winry forward, looking peeved as he did. When she crossed the road, Pollack glared at her with his automail eye.

“How could you do that? You were the one who told me to come by the shop at four, weren’t you?”

“Oh!” Once he told her that, Winry finally remembered. “I-I’m sorry!”

Several days prior, Pollack had told Atelier Garfiel that his eye was acting odd and Winry had accepted his servicing request. Since Pollack ran a general store, he could only leave his shop for a limited time, so he had scheduled an appointment in advance. However, the appointment had completely slipped Winry’s mind.

Despite her flustered apology, the hard look remained on Pollack’s face.

“I came to the shop on time, but then Garfiel told me you’d just gone out and wouldn’t be back for a while. You put me in a real pickle.”

She hadn’t just forgotten the appointment, but to her great shame, had also revealed that she’d only remembered it just now, when he had reminded her. Pollack’s anger was only natural.

“Luckily, Mr. Garfiel was free, so he looked at it for me instead,” Pollack said.

“I’m so sorry!” Winry could only bow her head in earnest apology.

“Really now,” Pollack frowned. “It’s your skills I’ve put my trust into, so make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Though Pollack still looked upset, it seemed Winry’s repentance had gotten through to him.

“Yes, I’ll be more careful,” Winry said, her head still lowered.

“I’m counting on it. See you.”

Immediately after Pollack disappeared into the crowd, Winry held her head in her hands and scolded herself, “What am I even doing?! I’ve got to get it together.”

Gshk GSHK-KREEEEEEEE!

The strange, tempestuous shriek of metal grinding against metal filled the air. An intense sound like a crash of thunder shocked the people talking in the street into silence. Those working in the neighborhood paused their work to see

what was happening.

“What’s that sound?” she wondered.

Winry, who had covered both her ears with her hands, looked all around for the source of the racket. Then she saw that the people passing by the front of Atelier Garfiel were calling into the studio, asking, “You all right?”

“Huh?!” Winry exclaimed. Winry let go of her ears and went into the shop.

“Mr. Garfiel!” she shouted.

When Winry rushed inside, she saw Garfiel along with Henrik and Weis, her colleagues. The three of them were around the new machine that they had just bought a few days ago. The strange sound had stopped, but a burning smell permeated throughout the atelier.

“Oh, Winry,” said Garfiel, turning toward her as he stood in front of the machine. She had never seen him look so grave. “Did you make sure to take care of this machine last night?”

He wasn’t asking so much as confirming something.

“Yes, I did, like I always do,” she answered.

Garfiel had left this useful, but somewhat touchy, machine’s maintenance to Winry. After the job she had taken the night before, she had finished servicing it like usual, and she couldn’t remember anything happening that would have caused Garfiel to specifically ask her about it. However, the unusually serious look in Garfiel’s eyes and the way Henrik and Weis were looking so stonily at the machine shook Winry.

Garfiel asked again, “Are you sure? You didn’t forget any part of the servicing, did you?”

“Uh, first I unplugged it, then I removed the base and blades and took the scraps out of the drive.” As she went through the servicing steps and her actions from the previous night, Winry unconsciously put her hand up to her chest as though to soothe her heart as it started to pound. “Then I blew out the dust with the air compressor and wiped down the base and blades ...”

That was when she abruptly stopped. Winry’s face rapidly paled.

“Oh, but the cylinder!” she cried.

She would normally rake out the metal powder that had worked its way into the machine, then oil the cylinder. That was an important step in ensuring the blades would be quick and accurate. She realized that past Winry had skipped that step.

When she quickly stuck her face into the machine that Weis and Henrik surrounded, she found that the normally straight blades were horribly misshapen. She could see parts scattered around. The sight caused her mind to go completely empty.

“I had a suspicion that was it,” sighed Garfiel. He could verify from how Winry’s face had changed color and she’d gone speechless that she had indeed made a mistake during the maintenance.

Winry’s lip quivered as she recalled her mental state the night before.

When she had been working on the machine’s maintenance, her thoughts had been revolving around Milia’s leg, the progress she had been making with several schematics, and Darish, all while she had also been fighting off exhaustion.

After several days of hard work and sleep deprivation, she had lost her ability to concentrate. On top of that, she hadn’t even been able to objectively see that herself. Her neglect to remember Pollack’s appointment aside, in her current condition, Winry had been inevitably headed toward making a giant mistake.

“This is no good,” said Weis. He had opened the exterior stay and brought his face up to a gap to check the inside of the machine, but now put the tool he was holding on the ground as though he had given up. “There’s a crack in the cylinder. It probably won’t be able to function accurately like that.”

“Looks like a bunch of small parts popped off all over the place too,” added Henrik. He had stuck a screwdriver in where the base was warped in order to pull out the damaged pieces, but now he also gave up, collapsing into a nearby chair. “We need to change out the broken parts or we won’t be able to get it to work.” He raised his palms, gesturing defeat. Next to him were blueprints and some automail as well as an unprocessed sheet of metal.

“But what about that automail ...” Winry trailed off. Her face froze as Henrik shrugged.

“We’ve gotta finish that by tomorrow morning,” Henrik said. “That sheet metal there is Weis’s. We didn’t think we’d be able finish without this tool, so we came by to see if we could use it.”

As he spoke, Henrik reached out to the automail he had set down. The automail’s exterior was crushed as though it had been put under a great deal of pressure. One of its parts clunked dully as it fell to the floor in front of Winry’s eyes.

“When we tried using the machine, we couldn’t control it, which resulted in what you see here. We’re lucky that we got out of this with just a broken casing.”

That terrible noise from earlier had been the sound of the automail being crushed by the damaged machine.

Only the exterior had been ruined, but with the machine now broken, the automail mechanics couldn’t finish their work. Similarly, Weis likely wouldn’t be able to proceed with processing the sheet metal at all. When Winry realized she had broken the cutting-edge machine they had all chipped in to buy, her knees started quaking.

“I’m sorry! I’m really sorry!” she cried. It wasn’t anything that could be fixed with an apology, but she couldn’t not lower her head. “I’ll look for parts immediately!”

If she could replace the broken parts, she could possibly fix the machine. Winry gathered the scattered pieces on the ground with both her hands, then quickly scribbled the model number of the bent blade and cylinder on some memo paper that was on the workbench.

However, when Winry tried to rush out of the studio, Garfiel stopped her.

“It’ll be impossible to get all of those parts today—there’s just too many of them. And the shops are going to be closing soon anyway.”

“But ... !”

Still half facing the road, and with a stricken look on her face, Winry watched Weis gently shake his head.

“The manufacturer makes this cylinder in a distinct shape. It’s not interchangeable with any other manufacturer’s parts and there isn’t much supply. Sometimes things like this happen.” After wiping the oil off his hands with the towel around his neck, Weis nestled his metal sheet under his arm. “I’ll head back to my shop to see if I can process this with another tool.”

“I need to at least see if I can go back and get the exterior back to looking how it was,” Henrik said, wrapping the broken automail in cloth. Despite their attempts to rally, the two experienced engineers had come over after determining that they would need the new machine for their work. That basically meant there was no other way to finish their jobs.

Because of *her* mistake, the two of them might lose their customers’ trust. In Rush Valley, where it was always the survival of the fittest, Winry knew full well exactly how important even a single customer could be.

Since Garfiel had put his faith in Winry’s maintenance skills, his colleagues might even think he was a poor judge of skill for entrusting the machine’s care to her. Even after he had taken her in as his apprentice, she had made a mistake and betrayed the trust he had put in her. She couldn’t stand by and do nothing.

“I might be able to gather the parts if I go to the shops around town! Please let me look for them!” Winry shouted, then ran outside.

IN THE EVENINGS, Rush Valley was bustling with customers who were heading back to their own jobs and townspeople coming home from shopping. Winry wove through the crowd as she rushed straight to the wholesale merchant who normally helped her.

“Mr. Mandel!”

“Oh, why, if it isn’t Winry. What brings you here?”

Mandel gazed down at Winry, curious after she had burst in through the door and ran up to the counter, out of breath. He asked, “Is there something you need a rush on?”

Winry caught her breath as she nodded and pulled the parts and note out of

her pocket.

“Oh, now those have taken a beating,” Mandel said. He picked up a flattened screw from among the parts on the counter and scrutinized it.

“I need replacements for these parts—slicing blades, a number C-1 screw, a number 77 spring washer, an A-8 anchor bolt ...” Winry recited the names and numbers of the parts she had brought to make sure there would be no mistakes, jotting down a list on the spot.

Normally, she would start up some small talk with Mandel, since she knew him pretty well, but right now, with thoughts of the broken machine weighing heavily on her, all she was capable of was making the pen race across the paper as she prayed she could collect all the parts.

It seemed that Mandel sensed Winry’s desperation from how silent Winry was as she moved the pen. He didn’t strike up any additional chitchat as he headed to the back of the shop where the stock was kept.

“Let’s see. You need ten, twenty ... twenty-eight in total, it looks like. Seems like I have all the screws.”

Winry followed Mandel’s back as he meandered back and forth in front of a shelf. She clenched her fists on the countertop as she tensely stared at him.

“There, thanks for waiting,” he said after a while. He had lined up about sixty percent of the parts she had asked him for. “Sorry. This is all I’ve got right now. I should be able to order the rest tomorrow, but if you’re in a hurry, I think you ought to try other places. Still, I’m not so sure that *this* will be available in this town.”

Mandel tapped one of the parts she had listed. It was the unique cylinder Weis had told her about.

“I’m the only shop that deals with this manufacturer, so your best option if you need it today is to go to the junk shops.”

“I understand. Then please let me pay for these things.”

“Huh? I’ll send you a bill later, so it’s fine,” Mandel said, surprised to see Winry pulling out her own change purse to pay. He would normally bill Atelier

Garfiel for all the parts at the end of the month.

“No, please let me pay today.”

“You sure?”

Mandel seemed dubious as he told her the total bill, but Winry paid, took the receipt, and immediately left the shop while thanking him.

The sky had been clear just earlier, but it was starting to gray as clouds formed. She didn't have time to worry about the weather.

“Twelve left!”

She clutched her package of parts as she opened the door to another wholesale shop. Then, after leaving just a few minutes later, she headed to the junk shop across the street. She repeated that process several times, gradually collecting what she needed.

“Three left!”

After leaving another shop that was pretty far from Atelier Garfiel, Winry ran without pause to find the remaining parts. Sweat dripped from her forehead, attracting dust that then smeared across her face.

Eventually the sun set and the clock's bell tolled seven times, and in a sign as clear as the bell, neon signs began to switch on and glow throughout town. The stores along the main road would still be open for about another hour, but the other shops would soon be getting ready to pack up.

Winry quickly headed into the closest junk shop. The shelves that lined the cramped shop were piled with broken automail, dust-covered tools, and various machine parts.

As she carefully walked past shelves that seemed like they could collapse at any moment, Winry picked out promising iron scraps one after the other and then replaced them before dragging out yet another part.

“This isn't it. This one isn't either. This one is broken.”

Though the parts were broken, they were still merchandise. In order to avoid getting them dirty, she would wipe her oily, dusty hands with a towel, but after touching the parts her hands would immediately blacken again.

The remaining three parts included the cylinder she had been told she likely wouldn't find, and two springs that would be used by the driving mechanism. Those were things she could not substitute with another manufacturer's parts. Once she finished searching a shelf, she next stuck her hand into a box in the corner.

"I-I found them!"

She wiped away the sweat trickling down her forehead as she pulled her prizes out of the box. She had found the two springs among other unfamiliar machine parts. They were slightly contorted and rusted, but they were easily usable if she polished them up.

Now all she had left was the cylinder. She prayed she would find it as she used a screwdriver to open up and peer into the ruined remains of what appeared to have been automail. She did the same for other parts, including a hunk of metal that might have once been part of a larger tool. However, she didn't find any additional windfalls, and still hadn't found the part in the end.

She returned the last part to the scrap iron container, paid for the springs, and went outside to find it had started raining at some point. The sky had fully darkened.

She stuck the exposed springs she had just bought, as well as her other bags, into the largest of the bags. Then she removed the top of her overalls, untucked the shirt she was wearing underneath, and covered the bag of parts with her shirt.

"Hopefully they won't get wet this way," she said, holding the parts she had collected to her stomach. Winry immediately jogged to the next shop.

She didn't have time to stand around. The longer it took her to get back to Atelier Garfiel, the less time Weis and Henrik would have to work, regardless of whether she could fix the machine. She desperately struggled to keep her legs moving. They had become so tired they barely listened to her as she went to one building after another.

While that was happening, the towel she had been using to wipe her hands had become too dirty to use, which meant Winry had to rub her hands on her own clothes to clean them before entering each shop.

By the time she realized it, most of the shops had closed. When she exited a shop after another fruitless search, the light of its sign and a few others, as well as their show windows, were the only things lighting the road.

She hadn't found the cylinder.

"What should I do?" Winry murmured despondently. The lights of the shop she had just left fell on her and cast an even larger shadow at her feet.

When she left the building entrance, she found the rain had started coming down harder. It pummeled Winry as she began walking aimlessly along the deserted road. The rain just kept coming down harder and harder, drenching her clothes and hair. Only the sound of the rain pelting down in sheets surrounded her, just as the commotion of the afternoon had earlier.

Droplets dripped from her chin, and while she walked along the dark road, the sound of the bell echoed from afar. Its sound, perhaps muffled by the rain, tolled nine times in succession before going silent.

Winry stopped in front of a show window.

Unlike her heavy, sinking mood, the inside of the show window was dazzlingly bright. The window featured rare automail and jewelry made from precious metals that had been created by some studio or other.

Maybe she hoped the bright light of the window would raise her low spirits, but for whatever reason, Winry stared at it as she continued along, though who knew how many times she might've passed by before. She stopped to look at the displayed merchandise, and just as she started to walk again, she stopped in her tracks.

"It's that manufacturer!" she said, pressing both her hands up against the glass.

Tools and metal parts, polished until they sparkled, were enshrined within the display case. What had drawn her eyes was a lump of unshapely metal that seemed as though it had been the sole part taken from a gigantic machine. From a gap between the gears and braces, she could see a cylinder inside of it and, on one corner, the stamp of the manufacturer she had been looking for.

Winry held her fluttering heart as she read a piece of text introducing the

merchandise, which had been posted next to it.

“‘A part used in a well-established manufacturer’s tools. Because they only use high-quality metal, their products outshine others in durability. Through alteration, it can be used for automail production.’ This is it!”

She pressed her face against the glass as she checked the displayed part. It seemed it was being used in a different machine than the one in Garfiel’s shop, but the cylinder was without a doubt the unique one from that particular manufacturer.

“Thank goodness!” Winry exclaimed, relieved that she would be able to fix the machine. But the relief only lasted for a moment. “No way.”

When she saw the price tag attached to the showcased merchandise, her face froze.

It was exorbitantly expensive. It was of high-quality metal, in good condition, and made by a manufacturer known for their high efficiency, but even with those things in mind, the price was still too high.

Winry’s eyes darted to the prices of the other merchandise displayed alongside it. Everything was far above market price.

“Could this place be ... ?” Winry said as she raised her head to look at the sign. Droplets of rain splattered on her face.

The establishment, which labeled itself a junk shop, seemed to be one of the commercial traders that had started to appear more frequently in Rush Valley. She suspected it was one of the places Garfiel, Henrik, and Weis had told her about. They would sell things for a high price without maintaining the merchandise properly—solely for a profit.

Standing in the rainy street, her hand paused over the pocket that held her change purse.

She had already spent quite a bit of money that day buying parts. However, she did have a high-value paper bill stashed away for emergencies. She had just enough to afford the part.

Winry looked up at the sign again, then at the cylinder in the window, before

she finally turned her eyes down to her own feet. Her sopping-wet shoes were covered in mud and oil.

She had been indignant to learn that Darish had ended up saddled with a leg that hurt him because of a crooked business, but at that moment, she was desperate for another crooked business's wares. Knowing that made her feel pathetic as a mechanic, and filled her with sorrow.

Winry's wet bangs clung to her damp forehead as she looked down, and raindrops coursed along her face. After following the path of a droplet that fell from the tip of her nose, she squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, she reached out with a chilled hand and slowly pushed the shop's door open.

IT WAS PAST TEN by the time Winry arrived back at Atelier Garfiel.

Without regard to the rain, the studio's shutters had been left a quarter of the way open, allowing lamplight to stretch out into the road. It seemed Garfiel had done that for Winry's sake for when she came home along the dark road.

"I'm back."

She headed into the studio under the shutters, hanging her head.

Inside, Henrik was trying to fix the machine, though the odds were stacked against him. He had headed back to his shop to make an attempt at his work with his own machinery, but it seemed he hadn't been able to do much without the new machine. Garfiel also held a wrench in one hand as he pulled off a broken part. In an attempt to fix the gap, he fit another part into the machine.

The two of them raised their heads, startled out of deep concentration by Winry's voice.

"Winry!" the worried men exclaimed.

"Winry, why were you out so late?" Garfiel asked.

Winry silently offered the bag of parts to Garfiel and Henrik when they hurried over to her.

"These are the parts for the machine. Did you find all of them?" Henrik said, eyes going wide as he accepted the bag and pulled the parts out, lining them up

one at a time on the workbench.

“The cylinder!” Henrik exclaimed in surprise when, at the very end, he found the snugly wrapped part.

“Will we be able to fix the machine?” Winry hesitantly asked, hands clasped nervously together as she watched him pull out all the parts.

“Yeah, of course. You’ve saved us!” Henrik said, breaking into a broad, genuine smile now that he was sure he could finish his work. “I’ll call Weis in. If we all work on fixing it, it’ll take two hours tops. Then we can work on the orders, and we’ll have more than enough time to finish by morning! Thank you, Winry!”

Though he was thanking her, Winry couldn’t help but hang her head apologetically. Even if she had gathered the parts to fix the machine, that still didn’t change the fact that she had broken the machine in the first place.

Henrik took an umbrella and left the shop. The studio was enveloped in silence once she and Garfiel were left alone. The sound of the rain hitting the roof was the only noise.

“Come over here. I can’t believe how wet you are.” Garfiel beckoned Winry over while she stood in front of the shutters with a somber look on her face. “You have to dry off or you’ll catch a cold.”

He placed a clean towel onto her head. Winry pulled out her hairband as she was told and dried her hair. Garfiel watched her with his arms crossed, then he eventually asked her in a quiet voice, “So, about that cylinder?”

Winry’s shoulders twitched in response.

“I can’t believe you found it. I wish I could just be delighted that you saved us, but where did you buy it?” he asked, voice hard and slightly angry. Winry clutched the ends of the towel on her head and looked down.

With his arms still folded, Garfiel tapped on his arm with his fingertip as though urging her to reply. However much he wanted her to respond, Winry couldn’t just tell him she had bought the part at an establishment everyone detested.

“I’ve told you not to go near those fishy shops, haven’t I?” Garfiel said, seeing right through her silence. His shoulders heaved with a sigh as he looked down at Winry.

“It’s risky getting involved with them,” Garfiel warned in a stern voice. The corrupt traders had recently become more aggressive. “Using them acknowledges their existence and makes them stronger. You know that, don’t you?”

Still gripping the towel, Winry apologized in a whisper, “I’m sorry for what I did.”

Garfiel’s face softened and he didn’t pursue the topic any further. He placed a gentle hand on Winry’s shoulder and said, “Now, go take a hot shower, get some food in you, and sleep for tonight.”

With his usual smile on his face, Garfiel opened the door that led to the back.

“Huh? Let me help with repairing the machine too!” Winry said, flustered, as Garfiel pushed her shoulders gently from behind, nudging her out of the studio.

“We’ll figure out the rest. You’ve already done more than enough by bringing us the parts,” he said.

“But!” Winry protested, pleading with her eyes, but Garfiel flatly rejected her.

“It’s fine, so just do what I’m telling you,” he said, urging Winry up the first few stairs.

“Also, there was someone waiting for you today,” Garfiel said, looking up at her from below. His face clouded, seeming like he was reluctant to tell her.

“Mr. Pollack?” Winry asked.

She assumed it was Pollack since she had upset him by standing him up for their appointment. Normally, she should have immediately apologized to Garfiel after coming back from Milia’s house, but she had been working so hard at collecting all the parts that she still hadn’t been able to actually talk with him about it.

“I’m sorry. I forgot my appointment with Mr. Pollack and caused you trouble,” Winry apologized. How many people had she apologized to that day? She

couldn't bear how pathetic she was. However, Garfiel shook his head.

"Don't worry about what happened with Mr. Pollack. I didn't mean him. It was Darish."

"What?" Winry stopped short when she heard the unexpected name.

"He came by the shop this evening saying there was something he wanted to speak directly with you about. Then he waited here until a little before nine."

"Darish came by," Winry spoke, hearing the tremble in her voice. Her heart was already sinking.

"And then, when he went home, he told me to tell you that you don't need to be in charge of his automail anymore. It seems like he's looking for another shop."

In her mentally and physically fatigued state, Garfiel's words were enough to knock Winry down.

"Warm yourself up and get a good night of rest today. Okay?" Garfiel consoled her as she stood frozen partway up the stairs, then he headed back to the studio.

Once she was left alone, she stayed in that spot for a while, her mind vacant. Eventually, she was able to get her legs moving up the stairs again, but it took her a few minutes. Back in her room, she found her desk and the floor soaking wet, the rain having blown in from the open window.

Winry staggered over and placed her hand on the wet schematics.

One was for Edward. She hadn't been able to work on it for a while because of how busy she'd been recently. The other was the schematics for Darish that she had reworked several times.

"What ..."

... am I even doing, she might have said to herself. Or perhaps she had been about to scold herself with a *What kind of idiot are you?* Winry had no idea herself which she had just been about to say. She picked up the ink-blotted blueprints.

The only sound that reached her ears was that of the incessant rainstorm.





CHAPTER 5

LISTEN TO YOUR HEART



IT WAS THE WORST MORNING EVER.

When Winry opened her eyes in bed, she felt as though a lump of melancholy had settled inside her. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Actually, it might have been exactly the opposite—it felt like her whole body and heart were completely empty. Nihilism seemed to be the only thing permeating her.

Winry hadn't thought she would be able to rest, but the physical and mental fatigue had quickly led her into a deep sleep. Thanks to that, even though she had been sopping wet from the rain, she hadn't caught a cold. But her limbs felt strangely heavy, and she had a hard time getting up.

Regardless of that, she somehow got out of bed, washed her face, and changed, then went down the stairs like usual to open the studio's shutters. A glorious blue sky unfurled before her, as though the deluge of rain had never happened. An invigorating post-rain breeze caressed Winry's face, and the puddles that littered the ground glittered with reflected bright sunlight.

When she turned to look back into the studio, the new machine was set up, fully back to normal. However, the sight didn't bring Winry any joy. Even her puzzlement about her numbness felt distant as she silently prepared the shop for opening.

"Good morning, Winry my dear."

As she wiped the workbenches with a well-wrung rag, Garfiel entered the studio a little earlier than normal.

“Good morning,” Winry replied, heart heavy as a stone. She paused her cleaning.

“Looks like you got some beauty sleep. But even though those bags under your eyes are gone, you still have such a glum look on your face.” Garfiel plucked the rag away from Winry after glancing at her spiritless face and hearing her equally dispirited voice. “All right, that’s enough prep work. You don’t need to come into the studio today.”

“What?” Winry froze.

Garfiel must have meant she was forbidden from entering the studio because she was useless as a mechanic. She couldn’t blame him for that after the fiasco from the day before, but having her incompetence thrust right in front of her made her cast her eyes down in shame—where she saw something being thrust in front of her: a package wrapped in a cloth with a floral design, and a canteen.

She looked up in surprise to find Garfiel smiling at her.

“Here, that’s your lunch and some water. Your task today is to run an errand at Mr. Dominic’s place. He’s splitting some metal with me, made from an ore they can only get around there, so take a trip up to his place for me, will you?”

It seemed Garfiel had woken up early to prepare her a lunch with that in mind.

“Well, off you go—quickly, now. Otherwise the sun will be setting by the time you come back.”

“Okay.”

When he gently urged her to, Winry took the lunch and canteen from him.

Given her failures the day before, she wanted to work hard and redeem herself, but she was also terrified of making another mistake. Garfiel, in his wisdom, had realized that and was sending her outside for a change of pace.

Winry decided to accept his consideration. After she finished her light breakfast, she changed into a black miniskirt and a white camisole to go out.

On her way toward the mountain road that led to Dominic’s place, she passed by a line of hotels. Winry looked up at the row of windows of the hotel that

Darish and his family were staying at.

Maybe Darish really hadn't forgiven her initial insensitivity? Or maybe he had gotten mad when Winry hadn't shown up after he had waited for so long, paying her a visit even while it was pouring rain? At present, Winry didn't have the willpower to figure out the truth of why he had taken her off his service.

Winry refocused on the road before her and quietly left the hotel behind, her face still stricken with sorrow.

As she climbed the steep slope of the mountain road, the view started to change. The boulders surrounding her began to fall away, opening up the full expanse of the sky. It was liberating. The direct sunlight started to make her feel hot. A wild goat stood on some sun-bleached rocks nearby, and far below the narrow road she was on—hardly wide enough for a single caravan—a river flowed.

She forged her way along the arduous path for several hours, traversing a rope bridge on the way, and finally arrived at Dominic's house.

The house, which had been built on a tract of land developed right in the mountains, looked like several interconnected boxes. Smoke rose from a tall chimney. Windmills rotated on top of the towering bluff behind the house.

This was Winry's second time visiting. Just like the last time, when she had come here with Edward and Alphonse, the sound of metal being forged rang out loudly from Dominic's abode.

"Hello?" Winry said. She rapped on the front door, which brought Dominic's son Ridel and his wife Satera out to greet her.

"Why hello, Winry," Ridel said.

"Come in. Thanks for everything last time. Look, it's Winry," Satera gently told the tiny baby she cradled in her arms.

The last time Winry had been to this house, she had been present while Satera had given birth in the middle of a storm. Winry had somehow helped safely deliver the baby. Ridel and Satera had told her they considered her Satera and the baby's savior.

“We named him Pitora,” announced the proud parents.

“Hello, Pitora,” Winry said. “It hasn’t been very long since then, but he’s grown so big.” She gently touched a finger to the baby’s full cheek. She was a bit jealous of the fast-asleep baby, who snored quietly without a care in the world.

“So, I came by today to get some steel for Mr. Garfiel. Would it be okay if I go by Mr. Dominic’s studio?” Winry asked Ridel as he warmed up milk in the kitchen after letting Winry have a good look at the innocent baby’s face.

“Right, Mr. Garfiel told me about the order. Dad has it, so you can go on over.”

Ridel pointed in the direction of the studio. Winry patted the cheek of the sleeping infant one more time before heading out. She knocked on the door to Dominic’s studio. After she got a grumble in reply, she opened the door and was greeted by the characteristic swelter that came from refining iron. In the middle of the cozy room, a stern-looking man pounded on a hot metal sheet as sweat formed on his forehead.

“Hello, Mr. Dominic,” Winry said.

“Come by, have you?” Dominic said without even looking at Winry’s face. As he tempered the metal, the way the corners of his pursed lips lowered into a scowl made him look exactly like a stereotypical stubborn old man.

“Well, take a seat over there,” Dominic indicated in a gruff tone. The only thing in the direction he had pointed was a wooden box. Winry sat down on it as he’d indicated. There was a stone furnace across from her that contained red hot steel. The inside of the studio was so hot that sweat started beading on her forehead just from sitting.

When she looked around, she saw sheets of metal laid out on a brick platform along the wall. A paper reading “Garfiel Five Sheets” had been stuck under them.

“I’ll check those over for flaws later on. Can’t let ’em go out yet, so give me a minute.”

That was all Dominic said when he noticed where Winry’s eyes had gone

before he focused back on his task at hand.

Clank, clank.

Winry silently listened to the repetitive sound of squealing metal. Dominic wasn't a talkative man. Only the sound of steel being tempered rung out between them.

The only time there was a break in the hammering was when Dominic stopped in order to check on the shape of the steel by picking it up with a pair of pincers. In Rush Valley, she would have heard the sound of engineers using machinery or the hustle and bustle of people regularly flooding into the town, but here, silence settled in when Dominic paused.

A breeze from a tiny window caressed Winry's sweaty head. The clear blue sky spread out to infinity outside. A black kite squawked somewhere in the distance.

Winry realized she hadn't experienced quiet in a very long time.

"You look down in the dumps," Dominic suddenly said, hammer clasped in his rugged hand. "Where'd all that energy you had before go, huh?"

Clank.

The hammering started up again.

When Winry had visited his place last time, she had excitedly asked Dominic to take her on as his apprentice. She'd been overflowing with ambition, going as far as to show him her mettle by helping with Satera's delivery. However, Winry currently lacked any shred of that zeal.

In troubled silence, Winry watched the metal Dominic pounded, and then finally said, "I made a mistake at work." She gradually told him everything that had happened since she had come to Rush Valley.

"I was so carried away with learning new techniques that I didn't even realize how Darish—this boy who came into the shop with a prosthetic leg—even felt. So I did some introspection and thought it over, then decided to put more effort into listening to my clients. When I did that, I didn't have enough time and I started to become careless without realizing it. I even broke a machine that

everyone pitched in to buy together.”

She looked down at her clenched hands, which had pushed open the door to that rip-off business just the night before.

“After causing them so much trouble, I was so set on redeeming myself that I went to a place I shouldn’t have. And while I was doing that, Darish came by the studio to talk to me again, but I quashed any chance of that happening!”

Her hands clenched into firm fists. When Winry’s lip started quivering, Dominic kept his mouth clamped shut and continued swinging his hammer. He wasn’t trying to end the conversation. It was almost as though he were silently urging her to get it all off her chest.

“While I was chasing after techniques and knowledge, I lost sight of the clients’ feelings. But when I tried confronting my failing head-on, I ended up pressed for time and couldn’t do all my work. If that’s what’s going to keep happening, I have to choose one or the other. If I don’t, I’ll just cause trouble for my clients and for Mr. Garfiel.”

Her emotions, which had seemed frozen just earlier, all rushed to the surface at once. Winry’s shoulders quivered and tears started to finally well up and fall from her eyes.

“But which am I supposed to choose? What if I make more mistakes after I figure out what I’ve decided? I just don’t know what to do anymore ...”

Winry’s feelings hadn’t numbed earlier. It was just that she hadn’t been able to find an outlet for her emotions. She was actually overwhelmed with feelings—after dedicating herself entirely to her goals, everything had crumbled before her eyes. It had even all been her own fault. Now those overflowing emotions, which previously had nowhere to go, turned into tears flowing down her face. She didn’t know how long she cried.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I started crying,” she said after sobbing for a while. She wiped away the tears still wetting her face. She felt better after letting it all out.

Dominic hadn’t stopped pounding away at the steel the whole time. Winry was thankful he’d simply let her cry as much as she needed and hadn’t tried to

comfort her.

“No need to apologize. Crying’s just proof you tried as hard as you could. Though there’re times when things won’t go your way, no matter how hard you try.” Dominic kept his eyes pinned to the steel he hammered as he spoke matter-of-factly. “One time, back in the day, a whole decade of technical knowledge did me no good when I suddenly had to work on a particular material. Put too much confidence in my own abilities and didn’t study up enough.”

“A whole decade.” Winry blinked wide-eyed when he said that figure. As young as she was, Winry didn’t have a sense of just how long that was.

“What did you do back then, Mr. Dominic?” she blurted out. She was so curious as to what he could have possibly felt about ten years of experience failing him that the question just slipped out.

“I was mad.”

“You were mad?”

“Same as you just were, young lady. You felt so wretched, you started bawling. As for me, well, I got angry at myself.” Dominic spoke indifferently of the past as though it were nothing noteworthy, and Winry couldn’t help but envy him, considering how paralyzed she felt about her current situation.

“How did you change the way you felt? How’d you get over it? Was there something that got you out of it or a secret to it?” Winry asked.

Dominic had many years on Winry. He had probably faced situations tougher than Winry could imagine. But now he was a brilliant, skilled engineer and self-confident in his work. Winry felt that if anyone knew how to get her out of her current torment, it would be Dominic.

However, as though to betray her expectations, Dominic bluntly shook his head. “A secret? There ain’t anything like that.”

Winry, who had been leaning forward with bated breath, pulled back in silent disappointment. But it wasn’t as though there would be a set answer to something like this, she reconsidered. She had ended up asking because her emotions had gotten the best of her, but she actually needed to find her own

way of working through this.

Silence visited them again.

Dominic had been pounding on the steel for a while, but it seemed he had finally reached a stopping point. He thrust the hot steel into a vat of water. Sizzling, the steam rose up from it and became one with the air, dissipating before Winry's eyes.

Dominic slowly stood up, grabbed the steel plates sitting on top of the bricks, and returned. He picked up each sheet of metal with a pair of pincers and closely inspected it. He squinted as he checked each side, making sure that none of the sheets were warped, then he wrapped them up in a thick cloth sack.

"Here, I've kept you waiting long enough," he said, with all five sheets having met with his approval. He pushed the sack with the steel into Winry's hands. "You drop those on your foot, and you'll be smarting. You be careful, now."

"I will. Thank you very much," Winry said. She packed the sack into her bag to carry it, then stood up, still feeling depressed. She opened the studio door, and bright sunlight poured in. Winry blocked the sun with her hand and started to venture outside when a voice from behind halted her.

"Girl."

When Winry turned around, she saw Dominic, sitting down and scratching his head, seeming at a loss.

"So, this isn't the first time you've hit a roadblock at work, right?" he asked.

"It isn't," Winry nodded and said modestly, "but this is the first time I've ever made such big mistakes. I hardly ever made mistakes in Resembool, and when I did, they were super tiny."

"That's because you were living in a small pond there." Though he was laying out a harsh truth by telling her that, Dominic nevertheless continued. "You were in the place you were born in with familiar customers and family for colleagues. Well, then again, I doubt Pinako would go easy on you."

Dominic, who had been acquainted with Pinako in their youth, seemed to

recall an unpleasant memory. His forehead broke out into a cold sweat, but he immediately collected himself and went back to what he was saying.

“When you live in a small world like that, you’ve got small responsibilities and mistakes aren’t a big deal. But now you’ve come to a big place like Rush Valley. We’ve got plenty of shops and plenty of customers, so there’s all the more to learn and enjoy. At the same time, that makes the mistakes bigger deals. In other words, everything you take on has gotten a whole lot bigger.” He muttered the weighty words in a rough monotone. Winry pinched the cord of the bag on her shoulder, sincerely listening to this more experienced mechanic who she looked up to.

“But, while all that’s going on, you’ll get bigger too and you’ll become someone who can take on all of that. You might have tough times for a while—well, that’s not exactly what I mean ... uhh, like I was saying, if you worry about the tough times and fear making mistakes, you’ll never get anywhere. I know you must’ve been scared dragging other people into your mistake, but you’re not alone, are you, girl? So what you should be thinking about now is, uh, basically, how do I put this ...”

He was a man of few words by nature and his supply of them, which didn’t exactly flow in the best of times, had choked up. Dominic faltered and scratched his head again.

“Ah, can’t get the words right,” he grumbled and crossed his arms, racked his brain, then grumbled again. After searching for what to say, Dominic eventually forced himself to squeeze something out. “Basically, it’s about what kind of engineer you want to be!”

The way he finished off by blurting the words out, it seemed as if he expected his unhelpful advice to be rejected. He set his mouth into a tight line. However, Winry could tell he was trying to cheer her up.

“I’ll try the best I can,” she said.

“And don’t you hold back.”

She bowed her head, then Dominic saw her off with the same scowl he’d had when she had come in.

“GUESS I JUST HAVE TO GET TO IT,” Winry murmured quietly to herself as she left the way she came. Despite what she had told Dominic, Winry was still crestfallen.

“I need to choose between spending less time working with clients in order to make fewer mistakes or doing less work to dedicate myself to each and every—no, if I take my time, I won’t learn anything new. But I want to make the best automail I can for Ed and my clients,” Winry muttered, trying to figure out a course of action. She started to feel a tickle at the back of her throat. She had been so set on doing well, but had failed, and felt both humiliated and pathetic.

Her now-empty lunch box clattered as accompaniment with each heavy step. Then, the towering rocky terrain that seemed to block out the world opened up to reveal the rope bridge. It was the same bridge destroyed by a lightning strike during the thunderstorm that happened the last time Winry had visited. The bridge had been repaired, and now it swayed in a swirl of wind that blew up from the depths of the valley.

Winry paused at the foot of the bridge. The protrusion of rock that jutted out unnaturally under her feet was Edward’s attempt at making a bridge using alchemy.

“I wonder how Ed and Al are doing?”

She held back her fluttering hair and thought about the two brothers headed to Dublith. At that moment, she would have given anything to talk with them—to have a conversation without a care in the world.

After Winry crossed the bridge, she took three more breaks during the long walk down the mountain path. The sunlight, which prickled her skin, gradually waned as the sky turned from aqua blue to amber, then crimson. In due time, the streets of Rush Valley, tinged in that red, appeared below her.

After she readjusted a steel rod that had worked its way out of her bag while she walked, Winry made her way farther down the slope. When she got close enough to hear the commotion of the streets, suddenly Winry spied a figure curled up next to the cliff she was walking along. She recognized the sound of the person’s quiet sniffing.

“Lettie?”

Winry had found Lettie, dyed in the color of the setting sun and sitting on the bare ground holding her knees.

“Oh, Winry.”

When the girl looked up, Winry noticed that blood trickled from Lettie’s knee. Even though the town was right there, the steep mountains were no place for a child to wander alone. Winry quickly made her way to Lettie’s side and kneeled on the ground next to the girl.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” Winry asked, surprised. She doubted that Darish, with his hurting leg, would have brought Lettie into the mountains. Lettie wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and stared at the ground.

“I came here by myself,” she said.

“All by yourself?” Winry said, taken aback.

Lettie fidgeted with some pebbles below her feet and pouted. “Because Darish said I get in the way. I try not to, but then he gets mad at me and tells me to go away. He told me to go play somewhere else because he hates it when I’m near him.”

Lettie hadn’t been able to stand being treated like a nuisance and had run away, leaving town entirely. While playing alone, she’d scraped her knee and become so anxious that she had ended up crouched in a ball on the ground.

Winry didn’t know what to say. Lettie was desperate for her brother’s affection and attention—that was why she had carried his crutch for him and tried her hardest to strike up conversations with him. In response, Darish had been viciously cold toward his sister.

“I hate my brother and how he’s always angry! I don’t care anymore!” Lettie fumed, grabbed a pebble, and threw it at the ground. Though she was angry, she was likely also heartbroken. As the little girl followed the tumbling pebble with her eyes, tears welled up in them.

“Lettie,” Winry said, painfully aware of what Lettie was going through from the little girl’s terrible scowl. Winry could actually sympathize with her. Both girls had devoted themselves fully to something they cared about, but it had all

been for nothing and now they were struggling, unable to find a way to escape their feelings.

Still weighed down by unbearable emotions, Winry put her hand on Lettie's bleeding knee and had the girl extend her leg.

"C'mon, show me your leg. It's still bleeding, so let me fix that."

Winry took out her canteen, opened it up, and used the leftover water to slowly wash away the dirt on Lettie's wound. Lettie kept pouting as she clenched her hands into tiny fists over her shoes. Seeing Lettie act so sulky brought back one of Winry's distant memories—in the past, she had cried, angry and pouting in the same way Lettie was now. She could hardly remember why she had been sulking or how she had settled whatever the issue had been.

"What am I trying to remember?" Winry asked herself. She grasped for the event at the edges of her memory, and the unclear scene gradually started to come back.

Warm afternoon light streaming into a living room. A large white cloth spread over a table, scissors sitting on top. And also a fist as little as Winry's was then, bumping against hers in encouragement.

"Oh." Winry now remembered the event clearly. "That was when I was helping Mom and Dad."

IT HAD BEEN BACK when Winry was young and her parents still lived with her.

In their home, her parents, both surgeons, had a clinic separate from Pinako's automail workspace.

After the Ishvalan Civil War broke out, causing a chain reaction of smaller conflicts across the country, more people had started to need Pinako's prostheses. In addition to offering their regular treatments, Winry's parents had been performing more surgical treatments to equip people with prostheses. Winry, wanting to help her mother and father, had asked what she could do despite how young she was, so they had given her simple tasks.

She had shown an interest in the intricacies of automail even as a toddler, and her fingers had grown nimble from her attempts to make inventions with the materials she'd been given. Using the skills she had acquired, she would

separate out the medical instruments and line them up based on their use, or would wash every container's nook and cranny. She could do most things.

But there was one thing she couldn't do, and that was bandage making.

Making a bandage required cutting a large white cloth into thin, straight strips. She just couldn't do it. No matter how many attempts she made to cut the big cloth, she would end up cutting it at an angle or making the first cut ragged, increasingly producing scraps that couldn't be used.

"I messed up again!" she said as she accidentally sliced off a long, thin strip she had been attempting to make from the cloth. Right as she was about to throw a fit, she heard voices call to her from the window.

"Winry, come out!"

"Let's play together!"

When she looked over in the direction of the voices, two blond heads bobbed up over the windowsill. The one with the close-cropped hair and big forehead was Alphonse. Next to him, the one with a cowlick that stood straight as a stick, maximizing its height like a quivering antenna, was Edward.

"You two play with each other! I haven't finished helping yet!" she called from her chair to the brothers, who had come over to play. Then she picked up her scissors again, but the only thing she was able to produce was a scrap of fabric just a few centimeters long.

"I hate this!"

She threw down the scissors and plunked her head onto the now-wrinkled cloth. She was so frustrated that things weren't working out the way she wanted that she was on the verge of tears. Then, suddenly, she heard a voice right next to her.

"Whatcha doing?"

She raised her head in surprise to find that Edward had appeared by her side. It seemed that he had let himself in through the door she'd left open for a breeze. Winry quickly wiped her eyes to avoid letting him see that she had been about to cry, but Edward paid no heed and peeked at her face.

“You weren’t crying, were you?” he asked.

“Hi,” said Alphonse, announcing himself before entering the clinic and studio. He also popped up next to Edward and peeked at Winry. When he noticed she was near tears, his eyebrows knit together in worry. “Huh? What’s wrong?”

Winry hadn’t really wanted to tell them about her mistakes, but faced with the compassionate curiosity of her two childhood friends, Winry reluctantly pointed at the mountain of fabric and said, “I’m trying to make bandages, but I just can’t do it.”

Edward put his hand on his chin and nodded as though he understood as he voiced a cocky, “Aha! So that’s why you’re sulking!”

“Shut up! I mean, I keep trying harder and harder, but I just can’t do it! I get that I suck already, so just go away!” Winry pouted and turned away from him, but Edward didn’t leave and instead plunked himself down on the seat next to her. He picked up scissors from the table.

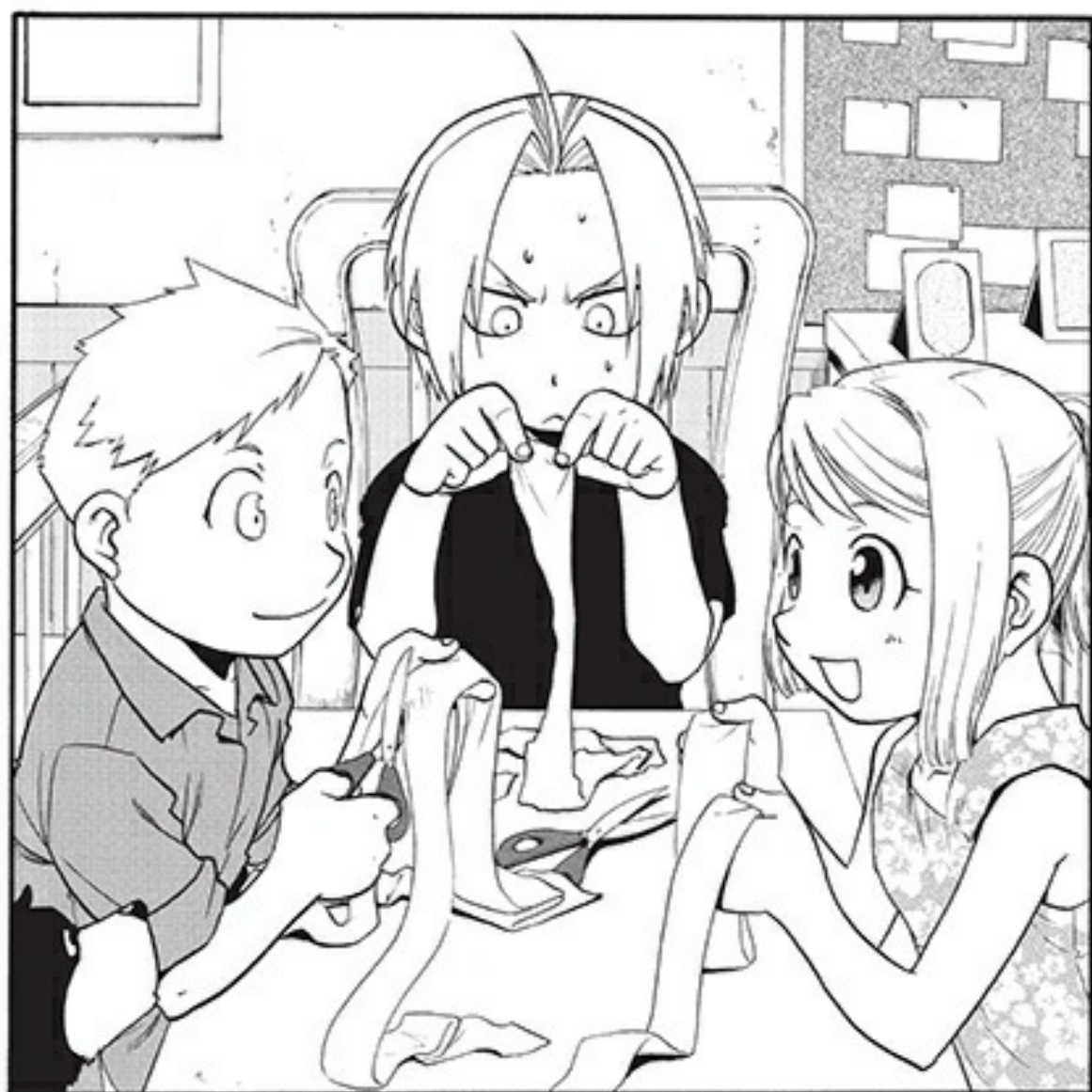
“Then I’ll help you out. Easy peasy!” he said, going to town on the cloth. But the scissors veered sideways and he ended up with an unshapely wide bandage.

“Wait, what? That’s weird.” Edward cocked his head to the side when he realized his blunder, but he started cutting with the scissors again. Though it was clear as day success wouldn’t come easily, he still didn’t abandon his attempts. “Wait, wait. Let me try again!” he said and kept cutting the cloth.

“Is it really that hard? Let me try too,” chimed in Alphonse. Up to that point he had only been watching his brother add to the growing pile of useless scraps, but now he rose to the challenge. His hands moved like clockwork and he produced a perfect, rectangular bandage in an instant, which made Winry’s eyes go wide.

“Al, you’re amazing!” she exclaimed.

“Grr ...” Edward gritted his teeth in frustration, the opposite of Winry’s enthusiastic praise. He refused to lose face as an older brother *that* easily, so he snatched the scissors from Alphonse’s hands.



“Winry, we’re going to knock this out of the park too!” he declared, clenching his hand into a fist. It wasn’t clear if he felt solidarity with her as another person who couldn’t make bandages or if he was motivated by sibling rivalry, but Winry shook her head and said, “It’s not that easy.”

“We’ll learn how to do it while we’re working on it! See!” Edward forced the scissors into Winry’s hand, and she reluctantly started to cut the cloth. Of course, it didn’t go well. Regardless of that, Edward told her, “Again,” and Winry struggled over and over again with cutting the cloth. When she veered off she would try to make the next one straight, and when she cut off a strip that was too thin she tried to make the next one thicker.

How many dozens of times had she gone through this? Eventually, she cut one long, thin strip out of the gigantic piece of cloth. It couldn’t be called pretty, but it was still a bandage.

“Whoa! You really did it!” Edward, who had been leaning forward to watch Winry’s hands, exclaimed in joy as though he himself had cut the strip. “See! Told ya you could do it. If you just keep trying, you’ll get somewhere eventually.”

“Are you sure I didn’t get it right by accident? I can’t count on cutting it right every time. What will I do if I make a mistake on another one?” Winry hung her head, despite the excitement of finally making a single bandage. After all, she had been making mistake after mistake until that point.

But Edward puffed out his chest confidently and said, “When things aren’t going right, I just listen to my heart!”

“Listen to your heart?” Winry asked.

“That’s how you figure out whether you actually want to do something or not. If you still want to do a thing after listening to your heart, then you’re better off just doing it rather than hemming and hawing over it! If you do that, you can learn how to do it someday! It worked just now, right?” Edward grinned, then gave her a fist bump with his tiny, warm fist.

“Ed, are you sure you just can’t be bothered to actually use your head?” Alphonse, who had been watching the whole scene transpire, gave his brother a

strained smile, which made Edward gnash his teeth.

“What didja just say?!”

“Look, you’re the only one who hasn’t been able to do it, Ed,” Alphonse said, managing to quickly dodge the fist his older brother aimed at his head in response.

Then, Edward, who had stood on the chair to teach his younger brother a lesson, sat back down in a fluster and righted himself before grabbing the scissors.

“I’ll show you,” Edward said. “Just you watch, this next one is going to be it!”

Alphonse and Winry couldn’t help but laugh at his antics. When Edward realized how single-minded he was being, he ended up smiling along with them.

The Rockbells’ living room was filled with joyful laughter for a while afterward.

“I GUESS I’LL LISTEN TO MY HEART THEN,” Winry said with some lingering hesitancy, gently placing her fist to her chest.

“Winry? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Lettie asked with wide eyes. Winry’s sudden gesture had surprised her. Winry quickly put her hand down. She had been right in the middle of tending to Lettie’s wound, after all.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Winry apologized. She capped the canteen and leaned in to inspect Lettie’s knee. Blood was still welling up from it, but all of the dirt had been washed away.

“How does it feel? Does it sting?”

“Just a little.”

“Let’s get that disinfected as soon as we get back. For now, we’ll just put a bandage on it.”

Winry often scraped her fingers while working, so she usually carried bandages on her. She gently wiped Lettie’s wet knee with a handkerchief, then pulled out a bandage and stuck it right onto the scrape.

“You should be all set. Does it hurt?”

“Nope.”

All traces of Lettie’s tears disappeared into a smile at her wound being kindly tended to. When Winry saw that smile, she questioned her heart again. She asked what it was she actually wanted to do.

The answer was obvious.

She wanted to keep learning about the latest techniques and gathering the newest information. She didn’t want to neglect having the compassion to carefully listen to her clients either. She couldn’t choose one or the other. She wanted to become a mechanic who could do both. What brought her happiness was seeing someone perk up and smile once they were outfitted with her automail. That was what her heart told her.

That was when Winry finally understood what Dominic had been trying to say, and his words connected with Edward’s. It was important for her to have determination about what kind of engineer she wanted to become. Continuing to walk the path she had chosen, despite any failures and struggles, was the only way to do that.

As Winry stood back up with her doubts cleared away, she heard the tolling of the town bell. The sun was disappearing over the other side of the mountains, and lights flickered on in the town below.

“Lettie, how about we get going soon?” Winry said, offering Lettie a hand up. Lettie didn’t grasp it, even though it was right there for her to take.

“I don’t want to see Darish,” she mumbled, keeping her eyes focused on the ground. Winry’s heart went out to the little girl whose emotional wound hadn’t been so easily fixed as the injury to her knee. Winry took back her offered hand and crouched to the ground so she was at the same eye level as Lettie.

Winry knew Darish didn’t actually think Lettie was a nuisance. He was just frustrated at himself for not being able to rush to his little sister’s aid. If Lettie started to avoid Darish, that would just make Darish even more frustrated. It would be sad to see the two once-close siblings avoid each other when it was clear that they were affectionate.

“Hey, Lettie.” Winry tried to peek at Lettie’s teary eyes and asked, “You just

said that you hate your brother, but do you *actually* hate him?"

"No. I like him," Lettie said quietly, a troubled look on her face as she shook her head.

"Then what would you think of keeping at it for a little longer and helping him out?" Winry asked.

Lettie said nothing, just pursed her lips and fiddled with the toes of her shoes.

It wasn't as though Lettie hated her brother. She had plenty of memories of Darish being incredibly kind. But she still couldn't agree to Winry's proposition because she was afraid of the brother she loved so dearly rejecting her.

Winry continued in a gentle tone, "I think that Darish is having a tough time right now, especially with his leg hurting. That's why he's been so short with you, Lettie. Once his leg is better, I'm sure that you two will get along again like you used to."

Lettie cocked her head to the side and asked, "Are you going to make his leg all better, Winry?" She was unaware of what had happened between Darish and Winry.

Winry was at a loss for words for a moment, but then quietly shook her head. She was disappointed she couldn't just tell Lettie, *Leave it to me*.

"No, but I'm sure he'll find a really good mechanic who will listen to him," Winry answered truthfully. "Once that happens, he'll start playing with you again and I think he'll even be able to run with you again. But if you tell him you hate him, you might not be as close with him later. Now, wouldn't that be sad?"

"Uh-huh," Lettie nodded, hanging her head.

"Then do you think you could stick things out with Darish for a little longer? I'm pretty sure things are going to start getting better," Winry said as she slowly stroked Lettie's soft black hair, combing through it with her fingers.

It was difficult for Darish, who was just a twelve-year-old, to be kind to others while he was in pain, but once he found a good mechanic he could trust, he would be able to replace his ill-fitting leg. It tracked that if he were in less pain, he would be able to be more considerate of his little sister.

Winry kept speaking. “It’s not the same as what you’re going through, Lettie, but I’ve got something tough going on in my life too. Something I have to stick through. So let’s work hard—together. I’m sure things will turn out all right.”

“Really?”

“Of course!” Winry gave Lettie a firm nod and offered a hand to the little girl. This time Lettie grabbed it.

Though Lettie hadn’t explicitly said she would be there to help her brother out, as she stood up, there was a slight difference in the girl’s expression. Her large dark eyes still shifted anxiously, but Winry could tell Lettie was determined not to run from the current situation.

Holding each other’s hands, they started to descend the mountain path. As long as they continued to walk forward, they were sure to get to the place they were trying to reach.

Winry squinted at the last rays of sun as, in her heart, the hope and passion she had back when she had started her apprenticeship began renewing.

THE VEIL OF NIGHT that descended on the town brought a rare refreshing breeze along with it. It seemed a chill from the previous evening’s rain had remained in the town. On the way back to the shop, Winry headed to the hotel in order to drop off Lettie.

“Do you think Darish will be angry?” Lettie seemed anxious about whether she would be scolded for leaving without telling her brother where she was going.

“I’m sure he’s worried,” Winry said. “Make sure you apologize to him.”

“Okay,” said Lettie, after an anxious pause that signaled her reluctance. Lettie’s gaze grew clouded and her pace slowed, but since she had accepted Winry’s words earlier in her own way, she didn’t entirely stop walking. Winry matched Lettie’s stride, thinking about how she also needed to apologize to Darish, in her case for the prior evening.

“All I’ve been doing lately is bowing my head and apologizing.” Winry couldn’t help grimacing as she recalled the series of errors from the past few days. Causing so much trouble was no laughing matter, but now that she could see

things objectively, she found she could see the dark humor in it. Having had some deep introspection, she resolved to never disgrace herself like that ever again.

They passed through the center of the town, reaching the street where the hotels were. They headed to the building where Darish should have been waiting.

“Huh? The lights are off,” said Lettie when they were in the front of the hotel. She had looked fretful about seeing Darish as they had walked to the hotel, but now she seemed disheartened that he was out.

“Which room is yours?”

“The one on the third floor at the very right.”

The window Lettie pointed at was pitch-black.

“The lights really are off. I wonder if he’s sleeping?”

Puzzled, the two of them headed into the brick hotel. It was already sundown and past the time any travelers would be getting accommodations, so the lobby was deserted save for its plain decorations—some round tables, a few chairs, and a single potted plant.

When they passed by the front desk, the elderly employee in the small back room put down his newspaper and welcomed Lettie back. The little girl waved her hand and, after Winry nodded in greeting, an elevator at the end of the hallway opened. Elevators were not an entirely common technological advancement outside of a place as technologically advanced as Rush Valley, but some of the town’s hotels had them installed to aid those in need of prostheses.

Winry closed the door to the elevator, which was made of crisscrossed metal bars that folded up on themselves, and pressed a button. The elevator slowly started to move, and the wall passed by, seeming to go down as they went up. Though each floor had a door, the elevator box they were riding on did not. Winry placed her hands on Lettie’s shoulders to keep the girl from stumbling or getting caught on the outer wall. When they reached the third floor, Lettie stepped into the corridor first and went to the room at the very end of the hall.

“Darish?” Lettie called as she gingerly rapped on the door, but there was no

answer.

“Darish, are you in there?” Winry also knocked. She put her ear to the door, but she couldn’t hear anyone inside no matter how she strained to listen.

“Maybe he went out?” Lettie asked.

They waited for a while, but Darish didn’t come back. Not knowing what to do, Lettie looked up at Winry and said, “I don’t have a key. And I’m hungry.”

“Hmm,” Winry said. If they told the front desk, someone would open the door for them, but Winry was worried about leaving Lettie on her own. Lettie’s knee was still bleeding even with the bandage on it, so Winry wanted to disinfect it sooner rather than later. She finally replied, “How about you come to the shop with me for now?”

So that Darish wouldn’t worry when he came back, Winry pulled some note paper and a pen from her bag and wrote something to the effect that Lettie would be at Atelier Garfiel, then she slipped it under the door. She also asked the hotel worker to deliver the message just in case, then the two of them headed outside again.

The stars had started to twinkle, and the delicious smell of chicken wafted to them from the stalls. Since it had been a long day for Winry, and Lettie had taken an extended trip into the mountains to play, the aroma made both of their stomachs growl.

“Maybe Darish went to buy dinner too?” Lettie said.

“Maybe he did. Or maybe he’s gone out to automail shops on his own and he’s talking to a great engineer.”

“I hope so.”

They looked at each other and grinned. From behind them and off to the side, someone suddenly called out cheerily, “Well, aren’t you two getting along.”

It was Garfiel. He had just come from a side street that was full of parts wholesalers. He carried two large paper bags. It looked as though he had just finished shopping and was heading home.

“Mr. Garfiel!” Winry exclaimed.

“Welcome back, Winry, my dear. Thanks for all your work today. And good evening, little Lettie. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Good evening, Garfiel ... sir?” Lettie smiled, hesitating on what to call him. It didn’t seem quite right to call him sir, but he was an adult, so she also felt that it wasn’t right *not* to call him something.

Garfiel’s eyes glittered. “It’s sister, dear.”

“Garfiel, sister,” Lettie repeated sincerely when Garfiel put up his pointer finger and wagged it back and forth to correct her.

The scene of the tall man and little girl so seriously sharing eye contact during their exchange seemed slightly out of place and made Winry crack a smile.

Lettie asked Garfiel, “Are you going back home after shopping, sister?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Garfiel said. He leaned forward to show Lettie the brand-new screws and metal rods in his bags. They glittered in the streetlamp’s light. It seemed that he had restocked all the parts he had run out of—his bags looked full and heavy. After Winry took one from him, they all walked together with Lettie in the middle.

“I’m sorry for making you do the shopping, Mr. Garfiel,” Winry said.

“It’s all right. I wanted to get a look at some of the parts myself this time, so I had Henrik come in the evening to mind the shop.”

“Once we’re back, I’ll help out right away,” Winry said brightly. If she had been in the same headspace as that morning, she probably would have been feeling down in the dumps after learning that the proprietor of the shop was doing the shopping in her place. But, at that moment, she was feeling positive and planned on working to make up for that once they got back.

“I wanna help too!” Lettie exclaimed.

“Really? That’ll be so helpful,” Winry encouraged.

As Garfiel watched Lettie and Winry smile during their exchange, he grinned too, saying, “Oh good, you’re back to your normal self.”

“Huh?” Winry blinked, not realizing what Garfiel had said for a moment. Garfiel made a dramatically mournful face.

“Because you were making a terribly gloomy face like this in the morning. I was worried.” He dramatically scowled his well-groomed eyebrows and puckered his small lips even tinier to pretend he was depressed, which made Winry duck her head apologetically and say, “I’m sorry.”

She probably had looked pretty gloomy that morning. Her face burned red in embarrassment, which made Garfiel relax his expression and grin.

“It’s fine as long as you’re feeling better. Oh, but there *is* something I’ve got to tell you.” Garfiel heaved up the bag, which had started to sag from its weight, then side-eyed Winry as though he’d remembered something. “A little birdie told me. You paid for the parts at Mandel’s shop and the other places with your own money, didn’t you? You didn’t need to do that. Now just how much did you spend? You’d better charge me for it,” Garfiel chastised her. How he had found out, Winry wasn’t sure, but it could have been while doing the shopping.

“I was the one who caused the trouble, so making it up to everyone by buying the parts for the machine I broke was the least I could do,” Winry hesitantly replied. Garfiel dramatically sighed in response as though *that* were the thing causing him trouble.

“Now listen, Winry, my dear,” Garfiel began right as they were about to get back to the shop. He stopped to punctuate his point. Winry stopped too and faced him.

However, she never got to hear him out.

Before Garfiel could say anything, she overheard something from inside Atelier Garfiel that she could not ignore.

“That’s right. Looked exactly like Harling’s kid. Anyhow, seems like he got caught up with a shady-lookin’ shop,” a man with an automail right hand said as he left the studio. It seemed he was on his way home after a tune-up. Henrik was following him to see him out.

“That’d be pretty bad. Hope you saw wrong. Well, careful on your way out.”

“Harling ...” Winry repeated the familiar name that had caught her attention. “It couldn’t be.”

Winry dashed forward. Once inside Atelier Garfiel, she started interrogating

Henrik, who had barely just sat back down at the workbench.

“Mr. Henrik, what were you just talking about?!”

“Whoa, you gave me a fright!”

He had just been about to start servicing the next customer’s automail. When Winry shouted at him, he nearly dropped his screwdriver.

“Oh, it’s just you, Winry,” Henrik calmed. “Right, right. You really saved us there last night. Thanks to that cylinder—”

“I’m so sorry about yesterday. But more importantly, please tell me about what you were just talking about. There was a boy who looked like Darish?!” she blurted out. Winry had wanted to give Henrik a proper apology about the other night, but her heart was pounding and she couldn’t help rushing it. Henrik seemed bewildered when Winry pressed him for an answer, but he still gave her one.

“Ah, right. That client who was just here is apparently staying at the same hotel as Darish. And he said he saw a kid who looked a lot like him being coerced by a peddler in the west district sometime this evening.”

One of the clients sitting on an out-of-the-way bench who had nodded along while listening in on their conversation joined in, saying, “Oh, that kid! Saw him too. That kinda spunky-looking boy with the crutch, yeah? He was surrounded by these shady looking fellows.”

“That had to be Darish,” Winry said. She didn’t want it to be true, but she couldn’t deny it. There were plenty of people on crutches in the town, but it was likely to be him if he had been witnessed by someone who knew him. It was also a fact that Darish hadn’t come back to the hotel even though the sun had set.

“Winry, what’s wrong?” asked Lettie, who had come in a little later with Garfiel, and noticed the heavy air in the shop. She looked uneasily at all the grown-ups.

“It’s nothing.” Winry quickly put on a fake smile and picked up Lettie. Until her mother was back, all Lettie had was Darish. Winry hadn’t wanted to upset the young girl by letting her hear what they had just spoken about. The other

clients, who didn't know much about the siblings, nevertheless picked up on the situation and kept quiet.

"That's right, we need to clean your knee," Winry said, feigning serenity. She led Lettie into the small back room and had the girl sit on a crate. She kept control of her own racing mind and pulled out a first aid kit from a shelf next to the stairs. She pulled off the bloody bandage and carefully applied some antiseptic, trying to avoid making it sting. To finish things off, she applied a new bandage and smiled for Lettie, who still seemed worried.

"I'm going to clean up the studio for a little, so could you wait for me here?" Winry said.

"Okay, I can." Lettie gave her a nod. Winry handed Lettie some white paper and a pencil that had been on the shelf to keep Lettie occupied with drawing, then immediately headed back to the studio.

"This isn't good." Garfiel had just hung up the phone in the studio.

"Mr. Garfiel, is Darish okay?" Winry asked, after firmly closing the door connecting the small room to the studio. She quickly made her way over to Garfiel. While taking care of Lettie's knee, she had been praying that the situation would take a turn for the better or that Darish hadn't been caught up in trouble to start with, but the atmosphere in the studio was unchanged. It was just as heavy as before.

"In all likelihood, one of those shady businesses got ahold of him. I just told the military police, but I'm not sure that they'll send someone to look, considering the circumstances." Garfiel patted his cheek and sighed. Unless a law was actually being broken, the public institutions generally wouldn't lift a finger.

If they couldn't rely on the military police, then the only option left was for her to do something herself.

"Then I'll go," Winry said without a moment's hesitation. As she turned on her heels, Henrik swiftly caught her by the arm.

"Stop right there!" he said. "You don't know what guys like that might do. You're better off not getting involved."

Winry whirled around in surprise. She hadn't expected anyone to stop her, but Henrik, who was normally a pleasant young man, looked stern. He continued, "He's not your client anymore, right? Sure, you could tell them off if they were trying to steal your clientele, but as things stand, they might claim that you, and Atelier Garfiel, are obstructing their business."

Several of the regulars still at the shop agreed with Henrik's levelheaded advice and chimed in.

"You can't be sure it'll just be one person you're dealing with. It's too risky."

"Even if he was forced into it, those kinds of places find ways around the law, so there's nothing you can do about it. That's just how things are."

Unlike Winry, who had just come to Rush Valley, the regulars and Henrik knew how terrifying the crooked businesspeople were and how much trouble getting involved with them could be. They looked pained to do it, but they meant to stop Winry from going to Darish's aid.

"But!" Winry looked up at Garfiel, imploring him while Henrik kept ahold of her arm. Though he looked incredibly reluctant himself, Garfiel shook his head and agreed with the others about not wanting Winry to go.

"I want to help him, but I can't let you charge into danger. We should at least go meet with the military police directly and ask them to look around the western district. I think that might work better than a phone call," he advised.

"But what if they force Darish into a prosthesis-manufacturing contract before anyone can get to him?!" Winry became more distressed imagining what would happen if that actually were the case. Darish had already been manipulated into getting a prosthetic leg that didn't fit him once and had suffered for years from it. If he was entangled with another substandard business, he might end up hurt in a way he wouldn't be able to recover from—physically or mentally.

However, Henrik pulled on Winry's arm as though to keep her from arguing more. "Why are you trying to take all the responsibility for him on yourself?" he said pointedly, staring into her eyes. He kept a firm, almost painful grip on her arm as he spoke. "What are you going to do if you fail or get hurt?"

His words agitated Winry, instantly making her consider all the successive mistakes she had just made earlier.

“Winry?”

She suddenly heard a tiny voice. When she looked over in surprise, Lettie was peeking out of the door.

“Um, where’s Darish?”

It seemed she had more or less sensed that Darish was in some sort of trouble. She hadn’t been able to entertain herself with drawing. The paper in Lettie’s hand remained blank.

Henrik, seeming uneasy, let go of Winry’s arm. Winry went over to the anxious little girl.

Lettie’s father was working in order to buy automail and her mother was making long trips between their home and Rush Valley. Lettie was determined to stay with her brother, regardless of whether it made him angry at her. They were all waiting for the day when Darish would be able to run around with a giant smile on his face.

“It’s all right. I’m going to go get him right now, so just wait here,” Winry whispered and turned back to the studio. Garfiel had picked up the phone again and was talking to the military police. Henrik watched her with worry.

Winry understood that their warnings had been for her own sake. But she just couldn’t abandon Darish.

“I won’t mention anything about the shop, but if anyone who seems like trouble comes looking for me, please tell them you don’t have anything to do with me,” Winry told Henrik and Garfiel in anticipation of things potentially going south. She was willing to take on a certain amount of personal risk, but she couldn’t bear the idea of making trouble for Atelier Garfiel, especially when she was acting of her own volition. She passed between the two of them and ran outside.

“I’m sorry! I’m going!” Winry shouted.

“Winry!” Henrik called as she left.

“Winry, dear!” Garfiel said.

She heard Garfiel and the others call to her as she rushed out, but she didn’t turn back.





CHAPTER 6

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE



AROUND THAT SAME TIME, Darish was being stared down by men in a large warehouse situated along a back street. He was feeling terribly uncomfortable.

“I’d like to get back to my hotel soon,” Darish said to the man standing in front of him, ignoring the automail they had been forcing him to look at.

“Not so fast. Look at a few more of these, will ya?” a thin, pasty man said with a broad grin.

A bald man polishing automail from the wooden crate he sat on agreed, “That’s right. What do you think of this one? It’s one of my own creations—even got carbon fiber to boot. Try picking it up. Pretty light, huh?”

When the man plopped the polished automail into his lap, Darish could only pick it up as he’d been told.

Several hours had passed since he had been brought into the warehouse. The whole time he had been shown automail and schematics the men had produced for sale in the past. The gigantic warehouse they were using as a shop was outfitted with worktables and metal sheets like any normal establishment, but the rest of the building around Darish was dimly lit and filled with shelves piled messily with objects, as well as an inordinate number of stacked wooden crates.

The men had been producing objects from all over the warehouse to show to Darish and simply wouldn’t allow him to return home.

“Say, didn’t we just stock up on some secondhand prostheses earlier?”

“Yeah, yeah. You got that right.”

“Since we’ve got a guest right here and waiting, we’ve gotta make sure he gets to see all of them. Where’d we put those again?”

After the pasty man and the bald man winked at each other, they plastered on smiles, passing by the counter in a roundabout route as they headed into the back of the warehouse. When the men disappeared into the tall stacks of wooden crates, Darish sighed. They had called him a “guest,” but they had actually clapped their arms firmly around his shoulders and practically dragged him in.

Looking up at the small window at the top of the warehouse, he could see that it was pitch-black outside.

“I wonder if Lettie’s gotten back yet,” Darish wondered. Searching for his missing sister was why Darish had been walking around outside in the first place, making himself vulnerable to aggressive solicitation.

His mother had constantly warned him not to go into the alleys, and he himself had been careful not to approach any shady establishments until that point, but when he remembered how Winry had rescued Lettie from trouble before, he had wandered into the alleys just in case she had gotten lost there.

This alley, which featured rows of half-raided buildings and warehouses, had only been home to shady characters; he had seen no trace of Lettie. Darish had felt relieved, but that in combination with it being the middle of the day had made him lower his guard. His eyes had ended up landing on a piece of automail on display in front of a warehouse.

It had been unceremoniously propped onto a wooden crate, but the leg’s design was sharp and Darish couldn’t help imagining how far that leg could’ve taken him on a run if he only had it. It could’ve been just like his original leg—the leg that could take him to his sister’s side faster than anyone else when she was in danger.

The way the doctors and mechanics had practically disparaged his original leg had dug its way deep into Darish’s chest like a sharp thorn—a thorn he still couldn’t pry out. The beautiful automail made him forget that pain. He felt as though that piece of automail could take him far, far away. It had inspired a

faint hope in him.

But that was also when some men had come out of the warehouse, talking to Darish in a sickly-sweet tone. Before he knew it, he was being sat down in a chair. The pasty man, who doggedly kept recommending automail to him and wouldn't leave his side, had declared dramatically that this shop could fulfill any request Darish desired.

"Sorry for the wait."

The two men who had secluded themselves in the back returned carrying automail legs and other prostheses.

"See, this here leg prosthesis is a real bargain. We've got one that'll probably fit you, so how about you try it on?"

"No, it's getting late and I haven't got any money on me," Darish firmly refused him.

Since the men had seemed so friendly when they initially spoke to him Darish had been lulled into thinking this was a conscientious shop, but as they tried to wheedle him with their sales pitches, his vigilance had returned. If they got a prosthetic leg on him, there was a chance they'd claim he was buying it and would demand payment.

"Hey, c'mon, don't be like that. And if it's money you're worried about, you don't hafta pay us right away," the bald man said and grinned disingenuously. That rubbed Darish the wrong way. Now cautious, Darish felt the condescension in the grinning man's smile.

"I can't choose one on my own," Darish firmed his guard.

The pasty man theatrically clapped his hands together. "Ah, I get it. Your mom's back at home, isn't she? But your parents wouldn't disagree with your decisions, would they?"

The man was slyly using the information they had forced out of Darish over the last few hours to move the conversation along in their favor. As pros, they were masters at scamming people out of money. A twelve-year-old, even a stubborn one like Darish, was no match for them.

As moonlight began streaming through the window, Darish started to feel anxious about Lettie. He was the one with the hotel key. The front desk would have opened the door for her, but he doubted Lettie could get to that point on her own, knowing how young she was. And if she were actually lost, he really needed to continue looking for her as soon as possible.

“I need to get back to the hotel,” Darish said as he got up, forcibly putting an end to the conversation.

When he did that, the look on the men’s faces changed.

“Wait right there. We’re not done talking yet.”

Darish ignored them. He grabbed his crutch, which had been propped up against a crate, and turned to leave, but a large, burly man was now standing in front of the exit. The iron door that had been open when he had come in was now firmly shut. The large man standing in front of the door made Darish automatically take a step back. Then the pasty man placed a hand on Darish’s shoulder and spoke to him from behind.

“Say, why don’t you let our mechanic make you some automail? You don’t have to pay right now. Just sign your name on this piece of paper here,” the man said in a slimy tone as he presented Darish with a sheet of paper. Darish didn’t even need to read it to know the contract would result in an exorbitant bill later on.

The man’s coercive tone made it clear that he wouldn’t take no for an answer as he said, “Or would you like to buy one of our secondhand prostheses? I know, how about that leg we’ve got displayed out front? That thing looks slick on the outside even though the internals have rusted out, but we can tune it up just for you.”

“Huh?!” Darish twisted around and shook off the hand on his shoulder. “Cut the crap! You told me at the start that I could just listen to what you had to say!”

He strained to keep his voice from shaking as he tried his best to put on a show of bravado. Then, they said something he couldn’t believe.

“How about you at least pay us our consultation fee?”

“What?”

Darish was so shocked at the groundless demand that he whirled around.

“You took your sweet time making us explain things to you, right? Obviously you’ve got to compensate us,” said the pasty man, who had dropped his fake smile.

Their persistence had been a ploy to squeeze money out of him. Potential automail buyers coming to Rush Valley often prepared significant sums of money. While the legality of Darish’s signature would be questionable since he was twelve, using a contract as a shield to wheedle his parents into something using their sharp tongues would be like child’s play to these men.

“A consultation fee? Can you—can you even do that?” Darish murmured, which made the pasty man shrug. As though that were his cue, the large man standing in the way of the exit started to yell, “Why’re you bringing this up this far in? You were lookin’ at the automail out front like you wanted it. We invested time into talkin’ to you! You think you can head home without even paying the consultation fee? Don’t mess with us!”

The man’s shout resounded loudly throughout the expansive warehouse. Darish clung to his crutch and cringed. Once the man stopped shouting, the pasty man waved the paper around and let out a showy sigh.

“Well, I suppose there’s no use reasoning with you. We’ll just have your parents pay us directly. Where’s the hotel you’re staying at? Since your parents will probably be back tomorrow or the next day, we’ll just wait until then. Well, I guess we’ll tack on a late fee for every day we’ve gotta wait.”

“But ... !”

The last thing Darish wanted was to cause trouble for his parents. They had already gone through so many hardships for him. Darish was so shaken that he couldn’t even find anything to say to the smooth-talking men. His hand trembled around the crutch and he hung his head.

Then, the pasty man hit his fist against his palm as though he’d come up with something.

“How about this. You just make a promise to have your automail made by us.

We'll get together a loan for you in exchange. You can just pay us back a little at a time after."

"Huh?" Darish said as he looked up instinctually. If there were any way he could settle the issue without causing trouble for his parents, he was ready to accept it.

The pasty man, who had constructed another fake smile, thrust out the document he had been toying with. Darish eyed the creased paper with a tired and vacant look. After being trapped for so long, it seemed much better to his exhausted mind to just choose an engineer at this point rather than paying some sort of incomprehensible consultation fee.

As Darish slowly took the document, an image of Winry floated into his mind. Winry had been the only person who had understood how he had suffered. She had told him she was willing to listen. He had been so happy about that, and had made up his mind to be the one approaching her this time when he'd gone to visit Atelier Garfiel the night before.

But Winry had broken a tool and gone out to buy parts for it. He had waited until it was late, but she hadn't come back. Darish vaguely understood that she had started hearing out her client's desires and worries, which had left her pressed for time and had started hindering her work. In this town where the clients came in droves, waiting on every single person in that way would inevitably result in consequences of some sort. Once Darish convinced himself that he never should have expected a mechanic working at a business to understand his feelings in the first place, he had told Garfiel to relay the message that he would no longer be coming to the shop. When morning came, he had been met with the pain of a leg incapable of walking and Lettie's worry. His only outlet for his inescapable irritation had been Lettie.

He didn't care what happened anymore. Darish put the tip of the pen to the document. Just as he did, someone knocked on the iron door.

"Is that a customer? If they're coming this late, it must be an emergency job," grinned the bald man who had been watching the proceedings from behind the pasty man. The more pressing the emergency, the more they could charge.

"Possibly. Looks like we got our second catch of the day. Hey, open that up."

“All right.” The large man grinned as he slid the heavy-looking door open.

“Excuse me!”

Once the door slid open along its rails, someone stuck their head into the warehouse. It was Winry. Her wide eyes, clear as a blue sky, met Darish’s just as he was in the middle of signing the contract.

“Darish! I finally found you!”

“Winry?”

When she looked into the shop, Winry realized what Darish had been about to do in an instant. Before the large man could stop her, Winry ran in and snatched the contract from Darish’s hands, then tore it to pieces, saying, “You can’t sign something like this!”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” The men laid their rage bare. They had almost gotten their hands on a mark. This strange girl suddenly getting in their way made them lose their cool. “Who the hell are you?! Keep your nose outta our business!”

“Your business? You can’t call this anything other than intimidation!” Winry cast aside the shredded contract, then shielded Darish behind her back and faced the men.

“How did you know I was here?” Darish asked Winry as he clutched her clothes. He hadn’t expected to ever see her again.

“One of the clients at the shop said that he saw you being solicited around here!” Winry said.

“And you came because of that?” Darish asked.

“It’s not like I could stand by and do nothing while someone tried to trick you into getting another leg that doesn’t fit!” Winry replied without letting her eyes leave the men. Her desire to help Darish had been stronger than her fear. Yet she couldn’t let her guard down around the men, who were exuding a sinister atmosphere.

“Why, you little—who do you think you are? Coming into our shop uninvited and accusing us of intimidation!”

“But that *is* what you’re doing! You were just about to have Darish sign a contract!” she replied to the men who glared at her, then tried to leave with Darish.

“Why, you—!”

She was so quick that the men were a moment too slow to act.

“C’mon, Darish, let’s head back!” Winry encouraged Darish, supporting him and keeping out of the way of his crutch while heading for the exit. She and Darish needed to get out of there while the men were still deciding whether to call it quits after realizing they had failed to deceive Darish.

However, the large man near the door yelled, “Hunh? This girl’s the one who meddled with me earlier!”

“You!” Winry exclaimed.

Winry remembered the man’s face as well. He was the one from the stall who had picked a fight with Lettie when the girl had been lost.

“You twerp, you’re gettin’ in the way of our business again?! Hey, she’s a mechanic!” the man from the stall, who had witnessed Winry fix automail with lightning speed, told his buddies.

“You mean this little girl?” The pasty man turned to Winry, seeming dubious. “Are you actually a mechanic? Where do you work?” Not only was she young to be working at a shop, he doubted that a girl like her was an engineer in the first place.

Winry said nothing, as she couldn’t respond without endangering her employer. She just ignored him and tried to leave through the door. It seemed the pasty man hadn’t expected a reply in the first place. He simply tsked, then quickly signaled at the large man.

“Oh!” Winry said, noticing what they were planning. Before she could dash forward, the large man closed the heavy-looking door.

“What good’s supposed to come from trapping us in here?!” Winry flipped around and glared at the pasty man and his bald companion.

The men were persistent, but once they realized they had made a mistake,

they normally didn't relentlessly pursue their marks. They didn't want to draw the attention of the military police. However, this time was different.

"Normally we'd just let you go, but we'll be in hot water if you go blabbing about how we kept the kid occupied at our place for a long time," the pasty man said, his lips twisting into a grin as he shrugged.

"You know just as well as I do that you won't be punished even if we did tell anyone. There weren't enough witnesses!" Winry countered.

"That would've been the case before, but the military police have already got their eyes on us. Somebody who got in our way earlier put up a big fuss too, so we started a little fire at their shop. Then the military police started suspecting us. Said that they'd run us out of town next time we caused trouble, and if things really went sideways, well." The pasty man put his hands out with his wrists together as though he were wearing handcuffs.

"A fire? That was you?!" Winry exclaimed. But no sooner had Winry realized she was in the presence of the culprits behind the arson than they had surrounded her.

Even if Winry and Darish promised that they wouldn't tell the military police, the men, who were a step away from being in shackles, likely wouldn't believe them. Since they'd even admitted to setting someone's business on fire, they probably had no intention of letting Winry and Darish go home unharmed. As if to cement that suspicion, the bald man reached out and violently grabbed Darish's shoulder, then dragged him to a chair by force.

"Ow!" Darish cried out in pain when his prosthesis chafed against his leg.

"We really didn't want to ditch this town, cuz we were making a killing," the pasty man said, "but we're done now. We'll get the capital from this kid so we can scam and hit up another town. Hey, tie these two up together." The pasty man jerked his chin, which prompted the large man to shove Winry from behind.

"Git. You get on over there too!"

"Ahh!"

When Winry was sent flying into the shop and away from the door, she fell

right into the stack of crates next to Darish. They'd broken her fall, but she had taken a nasty hit and groaned in pain.

After a moment, she managed to pick herself up from the pile of collapsed crates. As though underestimating Winry and Darish by assuming they couldn't run, the pasty man and the bald man had faced away from them and were whispering to each other a short distance away. She caught some unsettling phrases like "hostage" and "blackmail their parents."

Meanwhile, the large man had sat down in front of a large box near the door and was pulling out a cord to bind Winry and Darish.

Winry's eyes quickly darted to the darkened rear of the warehouse.

This would be her only chance.

Making sure the men didn't notice, she grabbed Darish's arm. He had been looking worriedly at her.

"Let's get out of here," she said in a clear, authoritative whisper, then she swung Darish's arm around her shoulder.

"Hey!" the pasty man cried out when he heard the commotion, but by that time, Winry and Darish were climbing over the mountain of boxes and headed deeper into the warehouse.

THE WAREHOUSE WAS EVEN LARGER than she had expected. Apparently the men had only been using the very front of it as their store. Lights hung from the ceiling near the entrance, but their illumination didn't reach the back of the building.

In the past, the warehouse might have been a parts storage facility for some wholesaler. It was packed with rows of shelves over two meters in height made from interlocked iron rods. The shelves within reach were occupied by prosthetics fittings and automail parts, but the rest were filled with cables, machine fixtures, and other such things.

Winry wove through the cramped passages between the shelves while lending her shoulder to Darish and muffling their footsteps. While the men were trying to clamber over the collapsed crates, she veered to the right or left whenever there was a break in the rows. As the pair fled deeper into the warehouse, its darkness concealed them more fully. The men shouted behind

them.

“Damn it, where’d they go?! Hey, where are the lights?”

“The ones in the back are broken!”

“We can’t let ’em get away!”

After getting past the crates, the men started to pursue Winry and Darish in earnest. However, they couldn’t find their quarry in the dark, obstructed rear of the warehouse. All the men could hear was the sound of the pair’s footfalls.

Relying only on the moonlight that filtered through the window, Winry clutched Darish’s arm and kept walking toward a remembered destination.

“It’s small, but I’m pretty sure there’s a door at the back,” Winry said.

Relying on the information that the men had been soliciting people off a road in the western district, Winry had run through the neighborhood and had passed by the back of what she believed to be this warehouse. She had vague memories of seeing something like a door next to piles of discarded materials.

“Hey, how’s it looking over there?”

Winry heard the pasty man’s voice a slight distance away. She went faster, crouching down with bated breath. The men continued to shout.

“Damn it! They ain’t here either!”

“Think those twerps are convinced the military police’ll come along while they’re hiding?”

“We’d be in trouble if that girl already called ’em in before coming here,” the bald man said, irritated, from a way off. The pursuers’ footsteps became more rushed.

If the men had known about the back exit, they probably would have gone to close it from the start, but their haphazard search didn’t indicate they were aware of it. That, or the door was unusable or nonexistent, but Winry drove those thoughts from her mind and pressed forward. After a while, she heard the front door of the shop open and the sound of new men’s voices.

“Hey, what’s going on?” they said.

“We’ve got ourselves a little problem. Come help out,” called the original men.

It seemed that there were others in their group. Suddenly, the sound of footsteps increased all at once, signaling an intensification of the manhunt in the warehouse.

“What are we gonna do?” Winry, who hadn’t expected there to be others, wiped the sweat that had formed on her palms onto her clothes, her mind racing.

She saw a candlelit lamp making its way into the back of the warehouse. It seemed the men had nothing else, since she didn’t see any other lights. That was the one stroke of luck Winry and Darish had, but their situation had still deteriorated, seeing as they had even more people to run from.

“At this rate, they’ll find us,” Winry said. “Darish, you’ve got your crutch, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Winry stopped and made Darish sit. She got on all fours and started to poke her head into the shelves around her, scavenging parts as she went.

“I’ll use this and this ... like that and ...”

After fumbling around to find what she had been looking for, she sat down at Darish’s side and took his crutch. She had retrieved a cable and a spare part with a rubber shock-absorption pad. She pulled the rubber pad off, put it on the tip of the crutch, then fixed it in place by wrapping the cable around it. With the rubber pad in place, Darish could sneak away from the men silently and unnoticed.

Winry handed the crutch back to Darish.

“Here. As long as you’ve got this, you’ll be able to get away even if I’m caught,” she said, then once again got onto the ground and searched through the shelves. “Now we just need a weapon. We need to have something just in case.”

As Winry searched for something to fight off the men once they were found,

Darish silently patted the crutch that had been placed on top of his knee.

“Why did you come to help me?” he muttered falteringly.

He could see the sweat glistening on Winry’s face even in the gloom. He was grateful that she had run around trying to find the warehouse and was still doing all she could to help him escape. But, when he thought about his immobility holding her back, his gratitude soured into irritation.

“I know I told you I wanted you to understand how I feel, but taking on all of a customer’s problems like that is just going to put more of a burden on you. You were out late yesterday night because of it,” Darish said.

“Oh, that’s right. I still haven’t apologized to you yet. I’m really sorry about last night. I know you came all the way over,” Winry responded, looking up and apologizing to him in a heartfelt way after hearing his halting muttering. That made Darish violently shake his head.

“That doesn’t matter! I’m asking why you’re trying to help me even though it means you’re just taking on more responsibilities! You’re a mechanic. You’re not under any obligation to go this far. What if you get hurt?” Darish said.

He looked down at his own aching leg. Faint moonlight from the window hit it, making the ill-fitting prosthesis glint dully from where it was strapped to his leg with a belt. The pain that had become a daily part of his life was even worse at the moment from having been roughly forced to sit down. The pain was like torture to him—not just physically but also mentally.

Darish was exhausted from all he had been dealing with.

“All they’re after is money,” he said. “If I go out there, they won’t do anything too bad to me. I was about to accept their offer earlier. I was going to sign. Even if they’re a little more expensive than other places, what does it matter so long as I choose a mechanic to make my automail? You’re the one who told me to hurry up and choose someone, weren’t you?! Just leave me alone!”

It hadn’t been his intention, but at some point his tone had turned accusatory. Winry blinked in surprise, but Darish just couldn’t stop. “Or what? Are you going to tell me to let *you* put your automail on me? Then be my guest. Any leg’s the same to me!”

Darish threw his crutch down and leaned carelessly against the shelf behind him.

When he looked down, he noticed Winry's hand trembling. She had come to rescue him despite knowing she was heading into danger and he had probably hurt her by saying all of that. Darish, thinking he might have made her cry, peeked at her to see if she was crying. The next moment, a pale palm whooshed into his field of vision.

"You dummy!" Winry said in a quiet but sharp whisper. She had slapped Darish on the cheek.

"...!"

As Darish held his cheek in surprise, Winry's shoulders trembled and her lips pursed together.

Darish didn't know that Winry had decided she wouldn't compromise between the pursuit of knowledge and attending to her automail clients. However, before Winry could tell him that, Darish's words had inspired unadulterated fury in her.

"Sure, I know that the prosthetic leg you have right now and any other artificial limbs you wear in the future aren't the same as your original leg. But, even if they're not the same, it'll still be part of your body, regardless of that!" Winry looked Darish straight in the eyes. "What we mechanics can do is explain your prosthesis to you and how rehabilitation will work. We make better prostheses by communicating with our clients. But it's your job to hear the mechanics out and choose the prosthesis you want. You need to choose a mechanic you can trust with that. You can't make an arbitrary decision. You need to think about this for yourself. You can't say you don't care! It's your body and it's important—it's your leg!"

As her anger worked its way into the words she spoke, Winry's eyes started to tear up.

"Hm? I think I heard a voice over here just now," someone said.

They heard the sound of shoes scuffing the floor near them. Winry and Darish froze, still looking at each other.

There was someone on the other side of the shelf right next to them. The person mumbled to themselves about not being able to find their target and flicked on a lighter. It was the large man. He strained his eyes as he looked around at the surroundings his flickering flame illuminated. However, it seemed the lighter was almost out of fuel since he switched it off immediately.

“Damn it. Can’t find anything like this!”

In irritation, the large man punched the shelf next to him with the hand that held the lighter. The shelf wobbled wildly from the impact. Objects fell off, dropping onto Winry and Darish. A jar about as big as a fist landed right where Darish’s leg met his prosthesis.

“Ugh!”

As though the man had heard the groan, he stuck his head through the shelf and peered into the other side where Winry and Darish were.

“Found ya!” he shouted when he noticed Darish. He reached through the gap in the shelf to grab him.

“Darish! Hyah!”

Winry gave the shelf that the man had stuck his head through a good push.

“Ahh!”

The shelf slowly fell. The man was saved from being crushed by the shelf landing on its neighbor, but he couldn’t protect himself from the objects tumbling down on him like an avalanche.

“Damn it! Hey, the two twerps are over here! Somebody get over here!”

While the man was struggling and flailing his arms around, Winry quickly grabbed the fallen lighter, pulled Darish up from the ground, and supported him with her shoulder.

“Let’s go! We’re almost at the back of the warehouse!” she said.

“I said it’s fine already!”

“Just come with me!” Winry insisted.

She forced Darish up and practically dragged him away. Before long, the other

men found their fallen comrade and started to clamor.

“Where’d they go?!”

“Hey, you, look over there!”

Winry knew that if she and Darish became surrounded, they would be powerless to do anything. While the large man’s comrades frantically helped him, Winry hurried along as quietly as possible.

Eventually, she made out a black wall directly ahead of them. Winry let go of Darish’s arm temporarily and slid her hand against the rough wall as she tried to find the back exit.

“I’m pretty sure it was around here,” she said.

Her fingers caught on something that felt like a cold plank. Winry pulled out the lighter and blocked its light with her hands and body. For a few seconds, orange light illuminated a door boarded shut by several planks, then she snuffed out the light again.

“This is it!”

Winry stuck her hands between the gaps in the planks and grabbed the handle. She pushed and pulled on it several times to make the boards shift, which made the door budge slightly. A single line of light from the streetlamps streamed through the opening and into the warehouse. When she yanked at the handle even harder, the band of light grew larger and her surroundings started to grow brighter.

“Darish, help me! It’s almost open. I’m sure we’ll be able to get out.”

But, when Winry turned around, she found the pasty man standing behind Darish. Before she could say anything, he shoved Darish. The impact made the boy’s prosthesis fall off, clattering as it tumbled across the ground.

“Whoa!” Darish cried out.

“Darish!” Winry said, running over to Darish’s aid.

“Finally found you!” said the man, grabbing her arm and pushing her face-first against the wall. “How about we cut a deal, huh? Let’s say that the kid came to our shop of his own accord, what do you say? You do that and we’ve got an

excuse for the military police. It'll sure help us out." Then he turned to Darish. "In exchange, we'll introduce you to a great piece of automail, kid."

The man grinned as he pulled a new contract out of his pocket and threw it down in front of Darish, who was on the ground.

"Darish, you can't!"

Winry turned her head to glare at the man who had pinned her. "Don't you feel any shame? Tricking people and roughing them up like this!"

"Not in the slightest." The man spoke as though it was everyone else's fault for allowing themselves to be duped. Winry's face was pressed against the wall, but her fist trembled in silent rage.

While that was happening, Darish absently gazed between the sneering man and the seething Winry, as though none of this were happening to him. His leg had tumbled far away and was out of reach. When he strained his neck to look at his right leg sans its artificial limb, all he saw were the blackish-blue bruises on it. All he could feel were the long-pent-up emotions that had tortured and haunted him.

Darish picked up the contract, then collected his crutch and managed to support himself on one foot.

The man grinned. "That's right, no need to resist when it won't do you any good."

"Darish!"

Winry struggled against the man holding her arm. Meanwhile Darish stumbled forward one step at a time toward the two of them.

Winry's earlier words had stung—terribly, in fact. But Darish had noticed the tears glistening in Winry's eyes. Those had been tears for him. And, at that moment, her eyes told him she was genuinely angry that he was about to be taken advantage of. He couldn't accuse her of sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. What Winry had said, what she had done, had all been the result of sincere concern for him.

Darish glared at the man. Then, he hurled his entire body forward.

“Let go of Winry!”

“Wha—”

The man, who had been convinced he had Darish in the palm of his hand, was caught off guard and stumbled. He fell to the ground.

“Y-you little twerp!”

“I get to decide who gets to be my mechanic! Like I’d let people like you be in charge of something as important as my leg!” he bravely declared and crumpled up the contract in his hands before throwing it at the man. Then he grabbed Winry’s upper arm from where she and the man had both fallen to their knees.

“Winry, let’s hurry up and get out of this place!” he said. Regardless of the fact that he was precariously balanced on only his crutch, Darish jerked Winry’s arm. He was a lot stronger than she would have expected.

“Darish ...”

He cast aside his hardened emotions, including the melancholy and impatience he had been carrying, and raised his head gallantly. Seeing Darish like that made Winry’s heart swell with joy.

However, they still hadn’t left danger behind. Before they could pry away the boards that had been nailed over the door, the man who had been sent flying leapt to his feet and roared, “If that’s what you’re plannin’ then we’ll show you what real villains look like!”

The man grabbed Winry’s and Darish’s shoulders from behind, pulling them down by brute force. The loosened boards clattered. The pair had been about to make a quick escape, but now were sent flying to the floor and rolled along the ground.

“Ahh!”

The man paid no mind to Darish as the boy’s crutch toppled and he lost the ability to move. Instead he pushed Winry to the ground and held her hand up, twisting with a terrible amount of force.

“Stop it!” Darish shouted.

He desperately reached out to grab the man’s clothes. However, he was lying

on his side and couldn't move. No matter how hard he tried to pull the man away, he didn't budge at all.

Winry's arm was grating painfully. Winry shut her eyes, preparing herself for the worst.

The next moment, a dreadful crack resounded through the warehouse.

"Huh?"

Winry didn't feel the pain or shock of a broken bone. When she opened her eyes, light from the streetlamps poured in, illuminating the ground in front of her.

"Winry, dear, where are you?! Are you okay?!"

None other than Garfiel had heroically kicked open the boarded-up door.

Once Garfiel recognized that Winry was pinned down and was about to have her arm broken, he glowered.

"You get your grubby li'l mitts off my darling apprentice!"

He ran over in a flurry of protective anger. When his heavy fist connected with the man's head, the man didn't even have time to react before he was sent flying through the air. He got entangled in the shelving and caused a glorious racket in his descent to the floor of the warehouse.

"Oh my, you've forced me to say such unbecoming things," Garfiel sighed. He straightened the suspender that had slipped down so that it was perfectly straight again and bitterly glared at the man who had caused him to speak in such an uncouth manner.

"Mr. Garfiel, why are you here?" Winry asked.

Garfiel beamed as he offered a hand to both Winry, who had remained on the ground stunned, and Darish.

"I couldn't just do nothing knowing my apprentice was in danger. And if those shady businesses have their way, Rush Valley won't have a future. We can't be scared of them claiming we're obstructing their business. Everyone banded together and decided to chase them out," Garfiel said.

“Everyone?” Winry repeated as, suddenly, Henrik and Weis rushed in.

“Catch them! We’re handing them over to the military police!”

“Yeah!”

People started flooding in one after another from the broken back door. They were all Rush Valley mechanics who Winry knew. And that wasn’t all—there were even clients wearing automail and normal prosthetic limbs.

“Tsk, looks like we’ve got all the town engineers here!” one of the crooks said.

“You all get what’s gonna happen now that you’re doing this, don’t ya?!” the men from the shady business blustered at the crowd of mechanics who had made their way into the warehouse. However, the engineers, determined not to let themselves be intimidated, didn’t hesitate as they raised their fists and charged at the men. In the blink of an eye, the inside of the warehouse turned into a free-for-all brawl.

“Come on, let’s get Darish out of here before he gets involved,” Garfiel urged them while gracefully dodging the bald man’s punch and giving him a karate chop to the head.

“Okay!”

Winry wrapped Darish’s arm around the back of her neck and supported him as she headed to the open back door. They left the shouts and tumult of the collapsing shelves behind them as they fled outside into the soft moonlight. After the gloom of the warehouse, the light seemed incredibly welcome to their eyes.

The narrow backroad was littered with materials leaning against the walls and door. They could see residents and military police gathering because of the commotion.

“Oh!” Darish stumbled over a fallen piece of wood.

“Darish!”

Winry braced herself and held on to Darish’s arm when he lost his balance, but she couldn’t support him. Darish reeled to the side and his left hand nearly hit the ground.

He reacted in surprised as a small hand grabbed him.

“Lettie?”

Lettie had caught her brother’s arm and supported him with her entire body.

“Darish, hold on to me,” she said.

Lettie, sensing her brother had gotten himself in danger, had followed Garfiel and the others. Now that she was supporting Darish, it was clear that she would never let go no matter what he said to her.

ONCE THE BRAWL at the warehouse ended, the men of the establishment were prodded along by the military police and taken away. Winry and Darish watched the proceedings from a safe distance. Lettie had stuck close to her brother the entire time.

Some unsavory-looking men had watched from behind the onlookers as their colleagues were taken away. Once they saw what was happening, they had immediately snuck away. Most of them were probably planning to leave town, likely anticipating that business would become harder for them from there on out. Their activities of fleecing the mechanics and customers out of money through blackmail were illegal, after all.

“It’d be great if we end up with fewer crooked businesses,” Winry said.

“It would,” Darish agreed.

A slight night breeze comfortably cooled Winry and Darish’s sweaty skin.

Darish shifted his eyes from the men being taken away to Lettie. Even though she struggled to support the weight of her much bigger brother, she hadn’t let out even a peep in complaint. Darish gently stroked his sister’s head.

“Thank you.”

Lettie’s eyes went wide, and as Darish broke into a smile when he met her gaze, Lettie also started to beam, full of glee. Seeing his sister’s smile from up close after such a long time going without it, Darish recalled again just how many times he had made her cry.

He murmured to himself, “What was I thinking?”

Several automail users and mechanics assisted the military police by carrying out mountains of documents from the shop that would serve as proof of coerced sales and broken laws. Just as those people wearing automail had come running to his rescue using their automail bodies, Darish wished he could run to his little sister's aid when she was in danger. That thought was firm in Darish's mind.

"I'm going to start putting real thought into my leg from now on," Darish told Winry. His expression was filled with anticipation and hope for his new leg. His expression was so bright that Winry practically had to squint to look at him.

"So I was thinking," Darish continued, seeming to have some trouble finding the words. "Could I ask you to talk to me about my leg?"

Winry blinked in surprise for a moment, but then a smile bloomed on her face.

"Of course you can! I would be happy to, if you'll have me!" Winry immediately agreed, incredibly happy that she once again would be Darish's mechanic. She wanted to develop her skills while also never losing sight of her clients' wishes. She felt grateful to Darish for helping her realize that, and wanted to do everything she could for him. With that in her mind, she looked up at the moon and braced herself by taking a deep breath.

But then, her breath stilled in her lungs.

"What's wrong?" Darish asked when he saw Winry's expression had frozen. He gave her a questioning look.

"I might be out of a job."

"Why?" Darish asked, giving a puzzled look in response to Winry's declaration.

"Because," Winry faltered. She had been told not to go near the shady businesses, but had broken that rule. She'd even shaken off her colleagues when they tried to stop her, and she'd forced her way out of Atelier Garfiel. After all the mistakes she'd made at work, and the trouble she'd caused, it was only natural she would be fired for not obeying the instructions of the studio's owner.

Just as Winry murmured "What am I gonna do?" she received a smack to the

back of her head.

“What’s this now, Winry, dear?” Garfiel had come to stand directly behind her at some point. He deftly re-curled his sideburns, which had frayed during the fight, while he looked down at Winry. “Didn’t I just say you were my darling apprentice?”

“But I didn’t listen to you and I messed up so much.”

She knew she would continue to make mistakes, like ones from the night before, as she attempted to become the engineer she sought to be, and she would probably cause Garfiel trouble every time.

“Listen here. I tried to give you this talk in front of the shop,” Garfiel sighed as he placed one hand on his hip. “And this applies to the parts you paid for too. You don’t need to worry about things like that. You’re the apprentice and I’m your teacher. I’m supposed to smooth things over when you make a mistake.”

Garfiel tapped the end of Winry’s nose as she looked up at him.

“Sure, you’ll probably make even bigger mistakes in the future and you’ll probably cause a lot of problems that you won’t be able to fix by yourself. But, I’m here to accept all of that—the whole package deal. So don’t worry about it. Learn your fill in this town, make mistakes, and grow.”

“Mr. Garfiel!”

Winry was jubilant as her eyes welled up with tears upon hearing those genuine words from her teacher. Finally Winry truly understood what Dominic had said when he had told her, “But you’re not alone, are you, girl?” There were people looking after her and they were understanding to a degree she couldn’t even begin to imagine.

“And also, there are tons of clients who want a mechanic like you,” Garfiel said, and moved his large body aside so she could see just who some of the clients who had participated in the brawl were.

“Hey, Winry!” Pollack raised his hand to her. “I just got myself punched, so my eye’s on the fritz. Could you take a quick look? I appreciate how thorough you are with your maintenance.”

“Could you take a look at mine too?! Looks like I’ve lost my screw right here!” Another man next to Pollack lifted up his grubby automail leg. “I’d also love it if you could lighten this for me, so could you do a consult?”

“Sounds nice. Maybe I’ll ask Winry to look at mine too. The mechanic I normally go to has got the skills, but we just don’t see eye to eye.”

Folks showed her their broken automail, pointing things out and telling her their requests, one after another.

“See?” Garfiel grinned and winked. “Now stop fretting that you’re going to be fired and take responsibility for the automail that broke during today’s commotion. Fix up these clients. That sound good to you?”

“Okay!”

Winry wiped away her tears of gratitude toward Garfiel with his big heart and the customers who insisted she look at their automail. Then she dashed off toward the clients with a spring in her step.



EPILOGUE



SEVERAL DAYS HAD PASSED since then.

Winry was using her afternoon break to write a letter in her room.

“Dear Granny Pinako. Are you doing well? I’m working my butt off every single day,” she began, reporting on her busy days in neat, bubbly writing flowing across the stationery. “Umm, oh, right, I know—I’m going to be in charge of about ten clients starting next week.”

She paused at that point and propped her head on her hand as she looked up at the endless stretch of sky beyond her window.

“I wonder if those two are working just as hard right now?”

A refreshing breeze drifted in through the window and puffed up Winry’s hair. The blueprints next to her letter rustled in the wind.

She had written the names of each person on the edge of the stacked blueprints so she wouldn’t mix them up. On one of those, next to the intricate figures and complex lines drawn on it, was Darish’s name. On another was Edward’s.

Winry’s continuous, unflagging work on those designs spoke volumes about just how much she had grown.

“Winry, my looovely!” Garfiel called from the first floor to signal her break was over. “Darish is here with his family! They say they’re here to discuss the design!”

“Coming!”

Winry stuffed the half-written letter into a drawer and pulled out Darish's blueprints from the stack.

She would never stop trying. She would never stop moving forward. As long as she didn't give up, she was sure to arrive at her goal. Believing in herself, Winry rose up from the desk.

"I'll be right there!"

Her answer, filled with hope, echoed up into the clear blue sky.



ALPHONSE'S TROUBLES



IF ANYONE WERE ASKED which organization that directly serves Central Command, the body that governs the great nation of Amestris, is of special note, no one would be at a loss for the answer.

It is the cluster of individuals who passed a certain demanding exam with their sharp wit. The ones who possess the strong sense of ethics and loyalty necessary to overcome strict psychological assessments. The ones who possess the exceptional ability to create complex transmutation arrays, then act with calm precision to transmute at a moment's notice. They are the ones who must accomplish all of these things to achieve their rank.

With solemn mien, they conduct themselves with poise even while bearing a share of the country's fate and are prepared to sacrifice their own lives in the line of duty.

Carrying silver pocket watches engraved with a hexagram and the president's crest, they bear a tremendous responsibility. They are our country's pride—they are the solitary and elite state alchemists ...

"Wow."

The sun climbed over the eastern horizon, announcing the coming of dawn. At that early hour, sitting in the hotel where he and his brother were staying, Alphonse couldn't help reacting out loud to a column about state alchemists that he had been reading.

"Poised and elite? I guess some people actually think that," he commented.

While many mocked state alchemists for being “dogs of the military” because of the extensive privileges that came with the title, the writer of this column was different. He seemed to genuinely respect them, though he also might have unrealistically idealized them.

“Alchemists aren’t all like that though,” Alphonse murmured, fully aware of the reality of things. He flipped to the next page.

“Hey, Al!” An obnoxiously loud voice shattered the quiet of the dining hall that had previously only been occupied by Alphonse and the cook preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

Night had barely come to an end, and the vast majority of the hotel guests were still asleep. Anyone awake at this hour who had common sense should have known to be considerate of the others around them. The willful violator of this common courtesy was none other than Edward Elric, a representative exception to the “poised and elite” state alchemists.

“Wait, Ed! Shh, shh!” Alphonse hastily pressed his finger to the mouth of his helmet while bobbing his head apologetically to the cook, who peered out from the kitchen, and the receptionist, who glanced over at them from the front desk.

Edward and Alphonse had been staying at this hotel, located in Central, for a while now. They’d been busy, between Edward visiting the Xerxes ruins and Alphonse having to deal with homunculi, among other things.

The night before had been a rare opportunity for both brothers to spend the evening in peace, so Alphonse had passed the entire night reading in the dining hall to allow his older brother to sleep. Winry, who had accompanied them to Central, was also likely fast asleep in her separate room.

Alphonse had planned on waking the two of them in about two more hours, but apparently Edward had awakened of his own accord and dashed over, making a racket as he came.

Without a care for the judgmental glares from those around them, Edward pulled out a chair, which issued a loud screech, and flopped down in front of Alphonse before thrusting a piece of paper in front of his younger brother.

“What do ya think of this?!”

Alphonse didn't have a response on hand, considering his brother hadn't given him any lead-up or warning. Alphonse accepted the document and sighed at his brother's typical hastiness. Seemingly random characters were scrawled all over it, unheeding of the neat and orderly page lines. Whether the text spelled out real words was debatable.

“What language is this in?” Alphonse asked, turning the paper at an angle. Then he held it farther away from his face and tried his best to decipher it. Edward reached over, plucked the paper from his hands, and turned it upside down before returning it.

“My bad. It was flipped.”

That didn't make the document much easier to read, but Alphonse was finally able to decipher the paper's purpose from a single line buried in some crossed-out text.

“A plan to deal with Scar? You've already come up with something?” Alphonse confirmed.

“Yup! Jotted down a few ideas!” Edward smirked while crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair.

The two of them had decided the night before that their next course of action would be dealing with Scar. The plan was to expose themselves to Scar, who was targeting state alchemists, and to use the potential danger to themselves to lure out the homunculi, who wanted Edward alive. The flaw in their plan was figuring out how to actually find Scar, who could be anywhere. They'd left off last night without any good solutions to their dilemma.

“I woke up in the middle of the night and just kept brainstorming until morning.”

“Sounds like you. Still, don't push yourself.”

Alphonse was relieved to hear that his brother had gotten some sleep at least. Edward had a bad habit of forgetting to both sleep and eat once his brain started going. Nevertheless, those bouts of concentration often led to amazing epiphanies, so Alphonse scanned Edward's scribbles with anticipation.

“Huh, so you changed the premise of the plan itself. That’s something.”

After reading through the entire thing, Alphonse found himself impressed yet again. They’d agonized about how to find Scar wherever he might be hiding out in the city. The plan on the paper suggested the opposite tactic: instead of finding Scar themselves, they’d make the outlaw find them.

“Right?” Edward let out a pleased little laugh, stretching back in his chair.

“But,” Alphonse hesitated at that point. Flipping their original plan on its head was brilliant, but he was finding it difficult to simply agree to any of Edward’s plans as outlined on the paper:

- 1. Hand out flyers to publicize our profiles and current location.*
- 2. Decorate a pushcart, then parade it around town while waving a huge flag.*
- 3. Spread rumors throughout town. Example: A tall, dashing state alchemist by the name of Edward is nearby.*

“I’ll ask just for the sake of it, but which plan do you want to go with?” Alphonse asked, hesitantly looking up from the page. Edward grinned, clearly having been waiting for his cue.

“This one, obviously!” Edward jabbed a finger at the paper. He was pointing to option three.

“I’m not surprised.” Alphonse heaved a heavy sigh that contrasted with Edward’s gleeful grin, then briskly shook his head. “If we spread a rumor that’s as obviously fake as this, Scar will probably think it’s a different person and won’t even engage. We’ll have to rule out the flyers, too, since there’s no way to be sure that Scar will actually read them.”

“Wait a second! What was that about it being ‘obviously fake’?!” Edward’s ears pricked up and he snarled. “What’s wrong with it? By definition, rumors don’t need to be true! What’s wrong with letting me dream a little, even if it’s only through rumors?!”

Edward was incorrigible. He had latched on to the thought and was banging his fists on the table like a child. Alphonse found it ironic in a sad sort of way

that the magazine and the phrase “With solemn mien, they conduct themselves with poise” was right below his brother’s fists.

“You can dream, but you’ll get better results by drinking milk.”

“Fine, what about the second option? We’ll attract the attention of everyone in town, and Scar’ll definitely notice!” Ever fond of dramatics, Edward threw his support behind the next plan, but Alphonse once again shook his head.

“I think the military police would put an end to that before we find Scar.”

Alphonse imagined the scene: a pushcart all aglow with neon signs, his brother perched on top while enthusiastically waving a flag, himself pulling it, and everyone on the streets giving them a wide berth. He sighed. The flag would no doubt proclaim *Meet the Elric Brothers!*

If they acted like a pair of suspicious persons drawing the curious stares of everyone around them, no way would the military police leave them alone.

“Personally, I don’t want everyone associating my name with being a weirdo,” Alphonse said, ignoring Edward’s pout. He tapped on option number three. “I’m for this plan. But how about instead of lying, we—”

“It’s not a lie so long as I grow tall someday!”

“Sure. Moving on ... If we’re going to spread rumors, it might as well be about something positive, don’t you think?”

Edward frowned at Alphonse’s suggestion. “You mean, like, about us cleaning up litter? That’s so boring, it won’t even count as a rumor.”

“No, I was thinking more like helping people through alchemy. It’ll draw attention and add authenticity about us being state alchemists, which will probably convince Scar it’s actually us, and, most importantly, it’ll improve your reputation.”

“My reputation?”

“Yup, your reputation.”

Edward twitched, and Alphonse nodded gravely.

Edward Elric’s infamy was one of the many concerns that had been weighing

on them recently. Throughout their travels, the older Elric brother had punched bad guys they encountered, fought chimeras, trespassed into forbidden areas, and caused collateral damage to objects and buildings alike within their vicinity. Word of these incidents had apparently been embellished and spread, resulting in Edward's reputation crumbling further.

It was to the point that when Edward had given his name at the front desk of this very hotel, a traveler checking in beside them had paled and murmured, "Isn't that the punk who destroys everything in his wake? The one who doesn't leave even a single blade of grass behind? I hope not."

They would have a lot of travel they'd need to do around the country in the future. It was a good idea to build trust now, before things got worse.

"Gotcha. If we gain attention through good deeds, Scar will show himself and my reputation'll improve." Edward smiled, satisfied. Sure, this plan would help their future selves out, but it was more likely that the pleasing mental image of himself being admired by the townspeople had convinced him. His sour mood vanished.

"Yup, that's right." Alphonse's armored face couldn't display emotions, but he was smiling inside.

The truth was, Alphonse wanted to find a solution to Edward's reputation problem more than Edward did himself.

While Edward was the target of the biases his poor reputation caused, it always fell to Alphonse to clear up the misconceptions. To take the incident at the hotel as an example, Alphonse had been the one to hold Edward back as his brother had shouted, "Who're you calling a punk?" Alphonse then had to patiently explain to the traveler that it was all a misunderstanding. The man had practically been in tears, desperate to flee to another hotel. Eventually, Alphonse had managed to get the situation under control.

Alphonse was happy to help his brother, but he still wanted to limit the number of migraine-inducing incidents. Improving his brother's reputation was the best shortcut to that end.

"All right, then let's dive right in!" Edward exclaimed.

“Yup!” Alphonse nodded along.

The brothers each had their own motives, but they were united in their goal to attract attention through acts of kindness. They unfurled a map of the town, chose their route, then enthusiastically set out from the hotel.

MORNINGS IN CENTRAL WERE BUSY—and rowdy. Shortly after sunrise, the streets would fill with commuters on their way to work, and cars would blare their horns as they cut through intersections.

Directly across the street from the city-center hotel was a bakery. The owner of the bakery opened the establishment’s creaking doors, preparing for business.

“Mister, got any croissants?”

“A bread roll, please!”

Several bike-riding children on their way to school swarmed the store from all directions. Unfortunately, they were more interested in seeing what kinds of bread were available than stopping their bikes. With a loud clatter, two of the inattentive children crashed into each other.

“Aah!”

“Ow!”

“Oh, hey there, you all right?” the baker said, leaping forward to help the fallen children. Luckily, the children got away with only minor scrapes, but their two bicycles had tangled together. The front wheels of both were bent out of shape. “Well, looks like you’ll have to get these sent to repair.”

The two children seemed distressed by the baker’s assessment and complained.

“But we were on our way to school!”

“We won’t make it in time!”

That was when, out of nowhere ...

“Not to worry!” a loud voice boomed from across the street. The baker and the children simultaneously turned toward the voice. Across the street from

them, standing before the hotel's front entrance, was a boy and a suit of patinaed armor.

"Edward Elric is on the scene!"

The petite boy, with his blond hair pulled back in a braid, dramatically winked at them before crossing the street. His red cloak billowed behind him.

"If you're ever in need of help, I'm your—whoa, that was close!"

"Ed, look before you cross!"

A passing car honked at the boy skipping across the street, then gave the suit of armor chasing after him a scolding as though Alphonse were his guardian.

"I know that kid." The baker remembered seeing the odd pair. They had been staying at the hotel for a while now and occasionally dropped in to buy baked goods.

The armored one had a gentle demeanor that didn't match his appearance and always politely greeted the baker. The red-cloaked young man, on the other hand, looked rather handsome, but both looked and acted testy, so the baker didn't have nearly as positive an impression of him.

The young man, as he now approached, was beaming as though he'd turned over a new leaf.

"Scuse me," he said, trying to sound gentlemanly while stepping in front of the children. He stood before the still-entangled pile of two bicycles on the ground and brought his hands together. He clapped, then brought his hands to the bikes. The moment his palms made contact with the metal, a brilliant light emitted from his hands.

The baker and the children closed their eyes against the light. When they reopened their eyes, the broken bikes were back to normal and lined up neatly in front of the bakery.

"Wow!"

"Was that alchemy?"

As the children cheered, the boy in the red coat passed by the dazed bakery owner and once again clapped his hands together, this time in front of the

shop's door. When the light faded, the broken hinge was fixed.

"Now you've got nothing to worry about!" the young man beamed.

"Uh, yeah, thank you." Faced with such a wide smile, all the baker could do was offer his gratitude, apologizing inwardly to the boy he'd assumed was a brat. "Um, what can we give you in return? How much ..."

"I could never! As a state alchemist, there's no way I could accept payment. Well then, we'll be off now. Be careful not to crash your bikes again, kiddos!"

With that, the young man suavely flashed a smile at the children, raised a hand in farewell, and ran off with the suit of armor at his side.

"Thanks, mister!" The children called and waved. "Thank you!"

"So that kid was a state alchemist. I had no idea he was so nice." The bakery owner stood awed at the young man's actions and smile. Sure, the young man's cheerfulness had been a tad forced, and there'd been something theatrical about the whole thing, but despite that, both the bakery owner and the children were left with a solid impression that Edward Elric had done a good deed.

"ARGH, I TOLD THEM MY NAME TOO SOON BACK THERE!" Edward grimaced as they ran, leaving the bakery behind them.

The moment they'd left the hotel with the resolution to help people, they'd witnessed the bicycle accident and Edward had panicked.

"You probably shouldn't announce yourself from across the street because people might not hear you," Alphonse agreed as he ran alongside his brother.

"All right, from now on I'll tell them right before transmuting. I should probably also stick the 'state alchemist' title in front of my name, right?" Edward said.

"Good idea. That'll make it easier for Scar to notice too," Alphonse responded.

"Also!" Edward continued. "While I'm introducing myself, you should help get everyone pumped! Maybe you could make little flags and wave them next to me or something."

“Got it. Oh, how about this?”

The two brothers picked up some flyers littering the side of the road and used alchemy to transmute them into fans that could be waved around. They discussed how to improve on them as they continued running toward the crowded main street.

Right then, they heard someone scream “Aah!” from a bookstore a little way ahead of them.

A bookshelf that had been piled too high with books had collapsed. A female employee was wringing her hands while standing in front of the broken shelf, and books were scattered all the way to the front of the store.

“All right, there’s our next target!”

Edward shot toward the store with a burst of speed, sucked in a huge breath, and then—at point-blank range and loud enough that the employee had to plug her ears—bellowed, “State Alchemist Edward Elric is on the scene!”

Then he gave the lady a wink so exaggerated it was practically audible before clapping his hands together.

“You can do it, Ed!”

As Alphonse cheered his brother on, a flash of light engulfed the bookstore. The light was blinding, like looking directly into the sun, but when it faded, the cracked bookshelf was completely restored.

“Was that alchemy?”

“That’s awesome!”

The people who’d been drawn by the employee’s scream were astounded by the transmutation they’d witnessed.

One of them tentatively approached Edward. “Hey, I’m working on fixing the building right next door and we’re in a tight spot because our ladder broke. You wouldn’t be able to fix that too, would you?”

“Just leave it to me!”

Agreeing with a wide smile, Edward moved on to the building next to the

bookstore and fixed a ladder that had snapped clean in two. While he was at it, he noticed that the handle on the dolly they were using to move cement was crooked and fixed that too. After that, he repaired a few shattered glass window panels and, by the time he was done, a crowd had gathered.

“He’s fixing stuff for free? Who is he?”

“He said he’s a state alchemist!”

“For real?”

The crowd blinked at the nonstop transmutations being conducted before their eyes while deliberating over the boy’s identity. They’d only ever heard of state alchemists conducting transmutations for the military, never for the common people. They found it hard to believe.

As though to reassure them, Edward climbed up onto the ladder he’d just fixed and announced, “State Alchemist Edward Elric! Pleased to make your acquaintance!”

While Edward stood above him with both arms raised in order to attract as much attention as possible, Alphonse echoed his brother’s name while waving his fans in encouragement. “Your city’s very own alchemist, Edward! His name’s Edward Elric!”

“Whoa!”

“Wow, he’s the real deal!”

The whispers turned into cheers, and Edward’s name and fame slowly spread throughout the city.

MEANWHILE, AT A HOSPITAL near Central Command ...

The spacious seven-story hospital building was home to over two hundred rooms, including reception areas, exam rooms, and sickrooms.

Roy Mustang stood in front of one such sickroom, pausing for almost a full ten seconds.

On the wall next to him were plates holding name cards listing the identities of the patients within, and this room had two names. For security reasons, both were aliases. Roy reached out to the name he had used as his own alias and

slowly worked the card out of its slot.

The other name would remain there for a while yet. After gazing at the other name for a few more moments, Roy finally grasped the door handle and entered the room.

The modest hospital room contained two side-by-side beds. On the bed closer to the window, sitting upright while reading the paper, was Jean Havoc.

The two of them had confronted a homunculus and both had been gravely wounded. Roy himself had sustained heavy injuries but had managed to get himself discharged, though he'd done so against doctor's orders. Havoc, on the other hand, had come out of the fight with two paralyzed legs and still couldn't even get up from the bed.

Roy had decided to drop by after his checkup to grab his remaining belongings. As he stepped into the room, Havoc didn't give any indication of noticing him.

He made his way over to Havoc's bed, next to the bed he himself had occupied just two days prior, then silently stood between them. He slid open the drawer of the sideboard he'd used during his stay. The items inside—his favorite fountain pen and the clip he used to hold documents—clattered within the drawer as he pulled it open. He fitted the pen into his chest pocket and was doing the same with the clip when he heard a quiet voice say, "You're more of a softie than I would've expected."

Roy quietly closed the now-empty drawer before turning to face the bed's occupant.

Havoc stared at the newspaper; his upper body rested against the inclined bed supporting his back. Roy couldn't read his expression.

Two days before, when Havoc had confirmed he'd lost the ability to move his lower body, Roy had told him, "I'll leave you behind, to make sure you have someone to catch up with."

Roy had left the room immediately afterward and hadn't heard Havoc's response. He didn't know whether Havoc had decided to keep following him or if the man had decided to retire from military life and leave it at that.

Whether it made him soft or not, Roy couldn't simply discard someone who had gone with him through thick and thin. He wanted to believe that Havoc would follow him. But recalling Havoc's anguished eyes and shaking hands as he begged to be left behind, Roy couldn't be sure.

"Any interesting articles in there?" Roy asked quietly, suppressing the roiling emotions within him.

"Not really." Havoc tossed the paper onto his lap blanket to let Roy read it.

The culprit of a countryside terrorist attack had been caught. A valuable vase had been stolen from an art museum. A new railway track had commenced operations, complete with photos from the opening ceremony. There was a report on the "Person of the Week," and a detailed recruitment ad for the military police. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The conversation sputtered out there. The lighthearted camaraderie they'd shared in the past when they'd complained about the incompetent members of the top brass, held little bets, and even skipped out on work together was no longer there. During the unnaturally long stretch of awkward silence, Roy quietly watched Havoc's expressionless face until Havoc shifted his gaze to the window.

"Oh yeah, actually, I did spot something interesting," Havoc said, picking up a pair of binoculars from the side table. He pointed the lenses toward the outside. "I just happened to take a peek outside yesterday and saw a crowd in the distance. My mother came to visit yesterday and mentioned there was some kinda fuss going on in the city. I was bored, so I took a look."

As he spoke, Havoc searched to the right and left with the binoculars before stopping, as though he'd found what he was looking for. He adjusted the magnification, then handed the binoculars to Roy. "Look, right by the eastern plaza."

Roy played along, accepting the binoculars and pointing them where Havoc directed him.

"Wha—" Roy was at a loss for words.

He couldn't comprehend what he was seeing, and, wondering if the

binoculars were broken, he lowered them to try to see without them. It was no surprise that what he was looking at was too far away to see without assistance, so Roy raised the binoculars to peer through them again.

He beheld Edward Elric. The young alchemist stood at the center of a ring of people gathered in the plaza and was energetically bringing his hands together. Every time his palms met, there was a lightning-like flash, indicating that he was using alchemy. It looked like he was mending things.

Alchemy had the power to reconstruct objects, so naturally, transmutation could be used to fix broken items. That was easy enough to accept. The part that was hard to swallow was that Edward, who had never expressed interest in strangers, was proactively doing good deeds. Even less believable was the fact that his usual scowl was nowhere to be seen, instead replaced by a wide smile plastered across his whole face.

On top of that, Alphonse, who usually stepped in when his older brother got too reckless, was also in on it, waving things that looked like fans while dancing back and forth.

“Impossible!” The words slipped from Roy’s mouth as, for the first time in his life, he was confronted by the full blast of Edward’s sparkling smile.

At the heart of the crowd, Edward shimmied up a nearby streetlamp, and upon reaching the top, shouted something. Roy couldn’t hear him but managed to read his lips.

“Edward Elric! Your neighborhood state alchemist, Edward Elric!” were his words.

“He’s been at it since yesterday, using alchemy to fix buildings and random stuff. He was in the eighth, fourteenth, and fifteenth sectors, or at least that’s what I caught of it. If we include the places I couldn’t see because they were hidden behind buildings, he’s been doing this at over a dozen locations. All places with high traffic too.”

Roy cocked his head to the side at Havoc’s explanation. “So in other words, he’s intentionally putting on shows to draw attention.” If all Edward wanted was to do good deeds, he could be subtler about it. To shout it from the rooftops meant that his true goal was attracting attention.

Through the lens of the binoculars, Roy saw Edward, his crimson coat fluttering about him, send the gathered masses an exaggeratedly large wink.

Roy lowered the binoculars and handed them back to Havoc, cringing at what he'd seen.

"What even was that?"

"Who knows? Not like I can do anything but watch from here."

Roy had been distracted by Edward's eccentric behavior, but at those words, he stopped paying attention to what was going on outside and looked at Havoc.

Havoc pulled the newspaper on his lap closer toward himself. "Well, seeing as how I found Fullmetal before you, I guess I'm not completely useless. I don't know why he's trying to draw attention, but I suppose I could provide support indirectly, by say, calling this number."

Havoc pointed at the "Person of the Week" article.

As Roy bent down to peer at the paper, Havoc slowly dragged his finger to the bottom of the segment. There, the article concluded by urging people to nominate upstanding citizens they spotted within the city and provided a phone number to contact. The article then stated that at the end of the year, the nominee introduced in the most popular article, along with their nominator, would receive a prize of one hundred thousand cens.

"We can split it fifty-fifty," Havoc murmured into Roy's ear.

Roy raised his head, meeting Havoc's eyes. There was no trace of Havoc's recent misery or pain in his pale blue eyes. There was that happy-go-lucky expression, and that hint of sass in his voice. It'd been too long since Roy had seen Havoc looking like himself.

"Fine. We'll use it to pay for drinks when we celebrate your discharge from here," Roy replied, giving a quiet smile and a firm nod.

Havoc hadn't given him a clear answer about his future, and Roy didn't intend to ask for one. But regardless of whether rehab worked out, Havoc would follow him. Roy believed in him.

Roy stood back up and looked out the front window at the wide blue sky.

“Still, I can’t make sense of whatever Fullmetal’s doing,” Roy said.

“Yeah, wonder why he’s doing all that?” Havoc asked.

“I’ll have some time off in a few days. Maybe I’ll go check in person.”

There was no doubt that the Elric brothers were trying to draw attention, so nominating them in the newspaper was unlikely to cause them trouble—even if Roy still hadn’t a clue what their true motives were.

Havoc picked up the binoculars at his side and looked at the city again. He commented, “Man, they’re still going at it. Now they’re in the twelfth sector. He’s standing on a residential building’s roof.”

“Before that, he was climbing a streetlamp,” Roy said.

“Yesterday, he was on top of a fence.”

Roy and Havoc shared a few moments of silence.

“He keeps climbing higher,” Roy said.

“Seems like it.”

As the saying goes, what goes up ...

Neither of them needed to say more as the same thought crossed their minds.

A FEW HOURS LATER ...

As though to validate the conversation between the two officers, Edward fixed a chimney, then used that as an excuse to climb to the top of it. Alphonse looked up at him and felt overflowing joy.

“You’re incredible, Ed!”

In any other situation, if Alphonse had seen Edward raising his hands high in the air and shouting his name like that, the little brother would have admonished him with a “What are you doing?!” But this time, it was different.

Even though they were doing this to find Scar, it still made Alphonse, gentle person that he was, incredibly happy to help those in need of assistance.

“Well, that’s one truly upstanding alchemist.” From among the overwhelming

throng of people, Alphonse heard voices praising Edward.

“He fixed our broken roof, y’know.”

“I got my chair fixed.”

“He didn’t complain or anything, just smiled and did his transmutation.”

As the people happily chatted amongst themselves, some approached Alphonse, who was still devoted to being Edward’s cheerleader. “Hey, I heard you’re that alchemist’s younger brother. Your brother’s a good one.”

“I know!” Alphonse gave a big nod in response.

Short-tempered and violent, always wearing a scowl, foul-mouthed—Edward left terrible impressions on everyone they encountered during their travels, but the true Edward was a deeply compassionate and kind person. As his younger brother, Alphonse was both happy and proud to have people recognize that.

Hoping that they’d be able to remain in everyone’s good graces, Alphonse raised his fans to continue promoting his pride and joy, his older brother. “The alchemist up there is Edward! He’s Edward, the state alchemist!”

“Um, ’scuse me!”

As Alphonse cheered next to the crowd, a small hand grabbed at his loincloth to catch his attention. Meanwhile, Edward began his descent from the chimney toward the outstretched hands of the cheering masses.

“Can he fix my toy too?” A young girl looked up at Alphonse nervously, clutching a wooden horse. “I came because I heard that a nice little alchemist could fix it for me.”

“Of course.” Alphonse knelt on one knee, gently stroking the girl’s soft hair, which got him a smile in return. Alphonse couldn’t physically show it, but he smiled back.

Then he froze.

Little alchemist. That’s what the girl had said. *Little.* The forbidden word. The trigger that would lead Edward into a terrible rampage. Alphonse had a moment of panic before remembering there was some distance between himself and Edward. He allowed himself to relax.

“Hold on for just a second, he’ll be right ...”

Alphonse looked back at the chimney, then jolted.

Edward was staring their way.

He had frozen, still on the ladder coming down from the chimney, hand raised toward the masses, but he was staring at Alphonse and the girl with a dark expression. There was no way he could have heard her from his current location, especially with the roar of endless cheering. Despite that, the gaze he was throwing them oozed with suspicion.

He couldn’t have heard, right? Alphonse swallowed his horror and hastily cheered, hands in the air, “Ed, you can do it!”

With Alphonse cheering and pretending nothing was amiss, Edward cocked his head once more, before once again smiling and waving while he descended the ladder.

“Whew, that was close.” Alphonse breathed out a sigh of relief before taking the girl’s hand and leading her through the press of people who had gathered below the chimney to get their items fixed.

“Ed, can you fix this girl’s toy next?”

“Yup, let me finish up over here, and I’ll be right there!” Edward raised a hand to acknowledge Alphonse before accepting a ceramic doll from an elderly woman in front of him.

“There’s a crack in this doll my husband gave me. Is it fixable?”

“Not to worry!”

Edward pirouetted on the spot before coming to a perfect stop in front of the elderly lady, flashing his sparkling white teeth and striking a pose.

At first, the pose had seemed too flashy but, curiously, now that it’d become part of the established routine, Alphonse found it comforting and suave. Alphonse watched as Edward placed the beautiful, elegant doll perpendicular to him on the ground and brought his hands together.

“All you need is the touch of State Alchemist Edward Elric and ...”

The spectators let out an awed “Ooh!” at the dazzling flash from the transmutation. Countless eyes trained on the radiating light, eventually watching it fade.

What appeared in its place was a doll, its porcelain skin smooth and without a single crack. However, its previously diminutive face now seemed disproportionately large and, in place of a dress, it wore strange clothes with swirling patterns. It was honestly less like a doll and more like a bizarre, archaic artifact.

“Ed!” Alphonse buried his face in his palms before sprinting to his brother’s side to whisper in his ear, “I thought we agreed not to get creative!”

“But!”

“No buts! I’m so very sorry. We’ll return this back to the way it was immediately.”

After dipping his head apologetically at the elderly lady, who was frozen in shock, Alphonse snatched the doll out of Edward’s hands.

“Hey, what are you doing to my art?!”

“You mean your arts and crafts?! We’re here to earn a reputation as good people. Isn’t that what we agreed to do?”

“That’s why I remade it cooler.”

Edward seemed so sincere that Alphonse had to hold in a groan. There was nothing he could say. He forced himself to power through it and passed Edward the small wooden horse from the little girl waiting nearby.

“Anyway, Ed, fix this toy for her. You got that? That means returning it to the way it was.”

“Ugh, what’s with you?!”

Edward pouted childishly. Alphonse turned his back on his brother and placed the doll he had given a makeover to back on the ground to retransmute it.

Because their current goal was to make State Alchemist Edward Elric a household name (in a good way), Alphonse had planned to avoid using alchemy himself, sticking instead to a supporting role for his brother.

That said, even though all he needed to do was fix what he was presented with, Edward sometimes took it upon himself to transform the objects into strange novelties. Just a short while ago, he'd turned a cute, lacy baby carriage into a contraption sporting a drill-like growth, sinister eyes, and a mouth. That had forced Alphonse to apologize to the indignant woman who owned it before once again taking it upon himself to retransmute it back to its former state.

"Ugh, right when his reputation was getting better," Alphonse sighed.

After returning the fixed doll to the elderly lady, Alphonse turned around and saw that Edward had placed the little girl's toy in front of him. Edward brought his hands together. Alphonse waited with worry, and the girl waited with anticipation. Through Edward's transmutation, the toy horse with its broken leg was restored—with its shape intact.

"Wow, thank you!" The toy was fixed in the blink of an eye, like a magic trick, and the girl clapped enthusiastically.

Suddenly, they heard clapping that rang out even louder than the girl's.

"Bravo! That was truly incredible!"

Standing close by was a young man wearing a flat cap, suit, and glasses with thin frames. His eyes glittered with emotion. A camera hung from his neck, and he clutched a notebook and pen.

The young man removed his cap, then gave the brothers an enthusiastic bow. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm a journalist at the *Central Times*. Am I correct in assuming you're State Alchemist Edward Elric and his younger brother, Mr. Alphonse?" The young journalist seemed like a very proper young man and introduced himself quickly while presenting his business card.

"In our paper, we have a section called 'Person of the Week.' While I unfortunately can't disclose who because of confidentiality, someone nominated you, Mr. Edward, for your services to the people and to society! I've come to request your permission to write an article about you. I'd like to follow and observe you for half a day, and I promise to stay out of your way! Would that be all right?"

"You're here to do a report on Ed?" Alphonse accepted the business card,

shocked.

The *Central Times* was a big name that Alphonse was very familiar with, and the name on the young man's business card looked familiar too.

"That column about state alchemists in that magazine ... Could that have been ... ?" Alphonse said, recalling the article on state alchemists he had read just the day before. The name of the journalist matched the credit on the article.

"You read that?! I'm honored, thank you very much! I've always wanted to be a state alchemist myself. I didn't have any talent for alchemy and ended up going down the path of journalism, but I'm *incredibly* excited to have the opportunity to speak with you in person like this!" The journalist's eyes sparkled as he put extra emphasis on the word "incredibly."

"Oh ho! I guess someone grateful for my help must've nominated me." Edward, the perpetual attention hog, smirked at the mention of getting coverage. "You know, I've always wanted to be in the paper, even just once."

Despite having had more experiences than others his age and carrying a somewhat more adult worldview as a result, when it came down to it, Edward was still an immature fifteen-year-old. Completely unaware of Roy and Havoc's machinations, Edward gave his assent with simple, childish glee.

"I'll take you up on that! You can even have a front-row seat so you can see everything better," Edward said.

"Are you sure?! Well, that's incredibly kind of you! Thank you very much!" Overwhelmed by the generosity coming from one of the state alchemists he revered so highly, the reporter's hand shook as it gripped his pen.

Alphonse glanced at the grateful journalist, then quickly pulled Edward to the side. "Ed, I don't think giving him such an up-close and personal view is a good idea."

"Why?" Edward blinked, already holding a broken radio, ready to mend it with alchemy. "If we're in the paper, there's a better chance that Scar will notice us, so what's the issue?"

"Uh," Alphonse didn't know what to say.

There was an issue. A pretty big one.

Yes, landing a huge interview in the paper was possibly the most efficient way of improving Edward's reputation—if no problems came up.

"That journalist seems to have put state alchemists on a pedestal. If he spots something even slightly problematic, he might end up devastated and write something terrible about us," Alphonse explained.

"Ha ha ha! Al, you're such a worrywart! It'll be fine!" Edward laughed off his concern.

"But!"

"No worries, no worries! You'll see, I'll play super nice the whole time he's here!"

Giving a final, firm thumbs-up brimming with confidence, Edward placed the radio on the ground, then clapped his hands together to fix the broken antenna with a flash of transmutation.

In a split second, light enveloped the area, and the journalist and spectators exposed to the seemingly awe-inspiring glow released a wordless gasp. When the light faded, the radio was completely restored.

"Here, this one's done!" Ed declared.

"Wow, it's completely back to normal!" The man who owned the radio stroked it happily. "This thing holds a lot of precious memories for me. I'm so glad it's fixed."

"No need for thanks! Nothing to worry about, see?" Edward glanced back at Alphonse with a charming smile as he extended a hand to grant the man a handshake.

But at the man's next words, Edward's smile froze.

"Thank you so much, little alchemist!"

"Agh!" Alphonse let out a cry of despair and turned his face skyward in prayer. This was exactly what he had been afraid of.

It was all too easy to imagine what would happen if Edward blew a fuse in the

middle of an interview with a prominent journalist. The area surrounding them would fill with screams, and the journalist, upon witnessing the fleeing masses, would slam the reckless violence perpetrated by state alchemists in his writing. The article, published in a major newspaper, would be read by everyone in the city, and Edward's infamy would spread throughout the entire country of Amestris.

From that point on, they'd be met with scorn everywhere they went. Alphonse felt the world go dark before his eyes as he imagined himself and his brother being chased out of every town. Avoided like the plague by everyone in the country, the two of them would have no choice but to wander the wastelands alone.

"Ugh, Ed, looks like everyone hates us now."

"I'm sorry, Al. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment."

"You promised never to say that, Ed!"

"Oh, Al!"

In Alphonse's mental image, the two brothers clung desperately to each other until they eventually faded into the dust clouds of the imaginary wasteland.

Now that Edward's reputation had started to improve, there was also more to lose, and it had led Alphonse's mind down that dark path. But this wasn't the time to contemplate their bonds of brotherhood. Alphonse needed to overcome this if Edward was to become a beloved state alchemist.

"Who're you calling a—"

"Ed!" Alphonse grabbed the tail of Edward's coat before his brother could leap at the man. "Don't! Hold it in! Didn't you say you'd behave?"

"Ugh!" At the last moment, Edward gritted his teeth and held himself back from grabbing the man's shirt and instead left his hand extended for a handshake as he'd originally intended to do before the grave insult. But he made no movement to actually shake the man's hand.

"Is something the matter?" the journalist asked. He'd been waiting for his cue to capture the handshake on camera, but paused upon noticing that Edward's

hand had frozen. The man who'd wanted the handshake looked down curiously when the hand extended toward him failed to grip his. Even the spectators, who had been chanting Edward's name, fell into silence as they became aware of the tense atmosphere.

"C'mon, the handshake!" Alphonse urged quietly into Edward's ear and, grinding his teeth, Edward slowly grasped the man's hand.

"Thank you so much," the man said. Wincing at the vice grip, the man once again tried to express his gratitude. "Um, regarding payment ..." Edward shook his head and raised both hands, still moving awkwardly.

"I can't accept anything like that. Please don't worry about it." Usually, the words were accompanied by a cheerful grin, but now Edward recited them stiffly, with no smile on his face.

"Um, did I offend you in some way?"

"No, nothing of the sort!" Alphonse stepped in, waving his hands to alleviate the man's concern.

The reporter spoke up next, his voice faltering. "But he's breaking out in a cold sweat. He's not tired, is he?!"

"It's nothing, you're imagining it! My brother's always full of energy and smiles, after all!" Alphonse said, subtly sliding himself between the reporter and Edward to hide his frozen brother behind his back. He glanced at Edward over his shoulder. "Ed, you look too serious!"

"Uh."

"Smile! Smile, Ed!"

"Ugh!"

Heaving in a massive breath, Edward gathered his resolve and finally managed to force the corners of his mouth to twitch upward.

"There's absolutely no need to offer anything in thanks. Please leave everything to me, your city's very own dependable State Alchemist Edward Elric!" Twirling once so his coat flared out around him, Edward gave the crowd his most exaggerated wink yet. Even if his eyes were a bit empty, neither the

journalist nor the gathered masses noticed. They all gazed at Edward with absolute trust and adoration.

“State Alchemist Edward Elric. What a truly wonderful person!” the journalist murmured breathlessly, and as though mirroring his awe, the people surrounding them also spoke his name.

“Edward Elric!”

“What an amazing state alchemist. He uses alchemy for the people!” The voices extolling Edward swelled in number as more and more people started to participate.

Edward overcame his earlier impulse to lash out and waved his hand in response to the cheers. Watching him, Alphonse imagined all the terrible scenarios no doubt lying in wait in their future and felt a headache coming on.

It was as though Alphonse had predicted the future, because the hurdle they’d just overcome was only the start.

“Scuse me, Mr. Shorty, please fix my toy!”

“Oh what a cute little state alchemist! Please fix the roof on my house.”

“I wanted to ask if you could fix some stuff for my kid’s playground, but ... Hey, alchemist, where’d you go? Oh! You were so short I couldn’t see you.”

“Astounding, you’re so popular! I’m so incredibly honored to do a report on such an amazing person!” The journalist boxed Edward in from behind, trembling with wonder and joy as his pen sped across the page. Meanwhile, crowds of people lined up in front of Edward with ever-rising expectations, all while unwittingly repeating the forbidden word. Edward had no escape.

Every time he heard the taboo word, Edward’s eyes twitched along with his fingers, moments away from attacking. Alphonse desperately tried to cover for him.

“What? My brother looks mad? No, sir, you must have imagined it!”

“He seems sorta unfriendly? That’s not possible! He’s just focused on transmuting!”

“Ah, you’re concerned whether he’ll fix that? Please don’t worry, he’s got it—

aah! Not another artistic rendition!”

They needed Scar to notice them and to improve Edward’s reputation. Alphonse was now painfully aware that achieving both of their goals was no easy task. All he could do was continue running around putting out fires.

“I’M BEAT.”

That night, Alphonse flopped face-first onto a table in the dining hall back at their hotel. Edward was sleeping in their room, and Winry was staying over at Gracia’s.

There were only two other guests in the dining hall, perhaps because it was after dinner hours. Alphonse watched the pair chat amicably while enjoying their evening meal, then let out a long sigh.

His armored body couldn’t feel physical fatigue, but he felt drained mentally. The entire day had been filled with nothing but stress. He’d had to pacify Edward, whose ire was triggered every time the word *little* was uttered. Whenever the journalist or crowd seemed like they might grow suspicious, he’d had to cover for Ed. And more than once, he’d had to personally restore items transformed into unrecognizable oddities by Edward’s whimsical transmutations.

Still, the effort had been worth it.

Though Edward had come close to snapping, he had refrained from rampaging and had somehow managed to maintain his mild-mannered, charming persona.

Sitting up from the table, Alphonse reflected back on the journalist’s behavior. After jotting down every one of Edward’s words and actions into his notebook, the journalist had been so moved that when they finally parted ways, he’d actually shed tears.

“I’m the happiest man in the world to have gotten the opportunity to report on such a miracle worker! I promise to write an amazing article. I’ll send you a draft of the piece immediately, maybe even as soon as tomorrow!” he gushed.

They stood there on the street as the sun set, the journalist gripping Edward’s hand firmly before the man veritably skipped back to the newspaper

headquarters. Alphonse watched him go, and felt all-encompassing relief.

Edward, on the other hand, had spent all day acting out of character, which had apparently exhausted him. Upon returning to the hotel, he ate dinner, then promptly collapsed into bed.

It had been a tough day, but now that they'd survived it, all they needed to do was wait for the article to be published. After that, everyone across the nation would know about Edward's good deeds. From here on out, the two of them were sure to be welcomed wherever they went, even if they visited every corner of the country. Just imagining that was enough to make Alphonse's exhaustion dissipate.

All they needed to do now was continue helping people while they waited for Scar to show up. There was still a chance Edward would snap, but Alphonse felt more confident in his ability to cover for him now that there was no journalist watching and recording their every move.

"I'm so glad we didn't parade around town in a pushcart." Alphonse suppressed a mental grin as he felt another wave of happiness, and opened the magazine he'd taken from their room, which he'd once again left to let his brother sleep in peace.

Perhaps what made him happiest was remembering how incredibly cool his brother had looked, smiling kindly while conducting swift transmutations, all while surrounded by a crowd of people who looked on with hope and awe.

"It would be so great if he could just keep being an amazing brother like this. Oh! I should let Granny Pinako know that we'll be in the paper! She'll be so surprised." Even though no one else was around, Alphonse chuckled to himself, until someone interrupted him.

"Mr. Alphonse!"

Alphonse jolted and almost ripped the magazine page he had been in the process of flipping at the sudden shout that echoed through the dining hall. Turning around, he saw the journalist, who should have already been back at the newspaper office, standing at the entrance to the dining hall.

"Something terrible's happened!"

The journalist was completely drenched in sweat, as though he'd sprinted the whole way to the hotel. Alphonse began to stand, sensing that whatever matter was at hand, it was serious.

"What happened?!" Alphonse asked while pouring water from the pitcher on the table into a glass to hand to the journalist.

The journalist gulped down the entire glass of water, then began to speak while leaning against the table to catch his breath. "Some info came in, and I wanted to let you know as soon as possible! I'd just finished writing the draft of the article and was leaving the office when we got a tip. Are you aware that an art museum was robbed yesterday?"

"Oh, well, yes?" Alphonse nodded, unsure why this information was relevant. He'd heard on the morning radio news broadcast that a valuable vase had been stolen from an art museum located in Central sometime late the night before. "If I'm remembering correctly, the stolen object was made by some renowned artist and is worth eighty million cens. Apparently the thieves haven't been caught yet."

"That's correct. Now, this is confidential information that hasn't been made public yet, but it appears that the thieves damaged the vase while stealing it."

"It was broken?"

Alphonse came to a sudden realization.

Stolen works of art were often sold on the black market, but if they were damaged in the slightest, they would fetch an entirely different price. The thieves would no doubt be desperate to fix the stolen work of art, and alchemy would be their best bet.

"So you think the culprits would try to get my brother to fix it?!" Alphonse surmised.

"Exactly! According to our source, there'll be a black-market auction in a town nearby tonight. We believe that Mr. Edward has either already repaired it or that they'll be coming by soon to ask him to so they can enter it in the auction."

"Oh no!"

Alphonse had no interest in being made an accomplice to a crime. He quickly sorted through his memories of the past day. According to what he had heard on the news, the vase was made of white porcelain, had indigo patterns, and was quite large. He couldn't remember seeing anything that fit that description.

"My brother hasn't fixed it yet. That means the culprits might come here!" Alphonse said, leaping to his feet and causing his chair to screech against the floor. He dashed out of the dining hall.

It wasn't as though they'd announced where they were staying, or their room number, but it wasn't hard to figure out either of those things. Rather than risk causing a scene during the day, it seemed more likely that the thieves would elect to sneak in to make contact with Edward at night.

"We'll be in trouble if Ed fixes the vase without realizing anything! We gotta tell him as soon as possible!"

"Let's hurry!"

Alphonse and the journalist cut through the lobby and raced up the stairs toward the brothers' room on the fifth floor, where Edward was sleeping.

"Mr. Edward is a wonderful person who uses alchemy to help people out of the kindness of his heart! I won't forgive anyone who tries to take advantage of him!" The journalist's face was flushed, and his fists clenched in righteous rage. "You don't find people like him often! He's so animated, yet there's something subdued about his eyes and the way he holds himself. His gaze is intense, but he's also capable of offering kind and thoughtful words to others. He even strikes that pose when he's doing alchemy. He's so generous, he gives his spectators a show," the man rambled on with praise.

The journalist had interpreted Edward's fidgeting as him being "animated." His blank expression after being forced to restrain himself was "subdued." Those moments where he had come close to snapping were him being "intense." The words he'd barely managed to squeeze out were "thoughtful." Apparently his over-the-top performances were "generous."

The wording really does make a difference, Alphonse thought.

"I didn't leave out anything while writing the article! I brought the draft with

me, so please take a look at it later!” the journalist said, happily patting his jacket pocket, where the manuscript apparently was being stored. Alphonse was truly grateful that they’d managed to avoid ruining the journalist’s misguided ideations.

But right now wasn’t the time to revel in relief. Alphonse and the journalist charged up to the fifth floor side by side. Upon reaching the correct floor, they saw two men standing in the long, door-lined hallway. They were holding something large wrapped in cloth and standing in front of the door to the room where Edward slept.

“Edward, sir, we came because we have a request,” one man said as he knocked on the door. His voice sounded normal—so much so that it was difficult to imagine that he was a thief. But white porcelain decorated with indigo was peeking out from behind a knot in the bundle carried by his companion.

“There! That must be them!” the journalist cried.

In most cases, criminals would avoid involving themselves with state alchemists. But as a result of his actions over the past few days, rumors had spread that Edward was an extremely friendly and kind alchemist. The thieves had probably decided that as long as they told a sob story about their precious vase, Edward wouldn’t suspect a thing and would even offer his services free of charge. On top of that, Edward was also only fifteen, and it was possible that the thieves were underestimating him.

Alphonse quickly strode down the hall toward the men. There was no need to rush; the stairs were their only escape route. However, Alphonse didn’t want to bother the other guests and had determined that the best course of action was to keep this quiet and efficient.

The conversation between the two men became more audible as he approached.

“Is he out? That’d suck, heard he’ll fix anything.”

“If we sell damaged goods, it won’t go for much. What do we do?”

“Not much else we can do. We’ll just have to get it fixed before the next

auction. Let's head back for tonight."

"Damn, after we came all this way!"

Edward had apparently been so tired that he'd slept through the knocking. The men tsked in annoyance before stepping back from the door.

Alphonse imagined the following scenario: the men would turn back the way they'd come, and Alphonse would stand in their way. He and the journalist would catch the culprits, then hand them off to the military police. By doing so, they would avoid waking Edward and bothering the other guests, and everything would be wrapped up within minutes. That's how Alphonse was sure it would go down—until he heard one of the men speak his next words.

"Damn that tiny little state alchemist."

The man's voice was barely more than a mutter. However, immediately following his words, an ominous creak echoed through the hall.

The pair of men turned questioningly, and they, along with Alphonse and the journalist, all stared at the door. Four pairs of eyes locked on to the door to Edward's room, which seemed to slowly bulge outward into the hall.

In the next instant, the door exploded with a violent *crick, crack, crack*. The figure that emerged from the wooden wreckage was not Edward the gentlemanly state alchemist, but rather Edward the violent punk.

"Who ... are ... you ..." the low, menacing growl was accompanied by hands curved into claws that he swung up, "... calling ... tiny ... ?!"

Roaring, Edward sprang forward with impressive force, landing in front of the man not holding the vase. Edward lifted him by the collar.

"Aaaaaaah!" the man screamed, more terrified of Edward's visceral rage than the fact that he was being strangled.

"Aaaaaaah!" his companion also shrieked, horrified by his point-blank view of Edward's unbridled ferocity. In his fear, he tossed the vase away.

"Aaaaaaah!" Alphonse and the journalist wailed, as the vase, worth eighty million cens, flew up into the air.

Edward's roar seemed to swallow all their screams as he bellowed, "I'M NOT

TINY!!!!!!”

Alphonse and the journalist managed to catch the vase, but when they saw Edward standing before them, his eyes were wide and wild.

“Everyone keeps on calling me tiny—*tiny*! Why do I have to put up with people calling me ‘little’ *twenty-eight times* today alone?!”

He’d apparently been keeping track.

“Twenty-eight times! Twenty-eight times? *Twenty-eight times*?! No more!!” Edward repeated his count while spinning the man in his hands around and around, and at the words “no more,” he hurled the guy down the hall.

“Uargh!” screamed the unfortunate man, his eyes still spinning, as he collided with the wall. He spun a few more times before crumpling to the floor.

“Ah ... ah-aah ...” The remaining man warbled. He fell on his rear upon seeing his companion get knocked out, and began scooting backward. Edward stepped right in front of him and stared him down.

“You think I’m short?”

“Huh?” The man had no idea what the question meant, but all he wanted was to get away from Edward, so he shook his head frantically. “N-no, sir.”

“Then am I tall?”

“Y-yes, you are! So tall, you reach the sky!”

“Then why’d you call me tiny?!”

Edward grabbed the fleeing man by the legs and heaved him up. The incensed alchemist twisted his upper body backward to gain momentum, then slung the man forward with all his might.

“It burns! It burns!” The man yelled and writhed, feeling the carpet scratch against his back as he slid several meters along it. The inglorious slide ended when the man crashed into the wall and lost consciousness. The journalist and Alphonse watched everything in stunned silence from the end of the hall.

“M-Mr. Edward,” the journalist murmured, still holding the vase and at a loss for how to act when faced with an Edward who was behaving nothing like the

young man he'd seen during the day. At the sound of his voice, Edward spun around.

"You with these guys too?" Edward said, eyes wild.

"What, no, it's me! The journalist who was with you during the day!"

"So you *are* with these guys!"

Apparently his ears were no longer functioning. Mumbling gibberish, Edward grabbed a box for storing bedsheets that was lying in the hall and lifted it above his head, then began chasing the fleeing journalist with the intent of stuffing the man in it.

"Don't judge me, all right?! I'm growing! I'm still growing, I tell you!" Edward shouted.

Upon hearing the racket, an employee arrived, having dashed up the stairs to the scene. "Excuse me, mister, are you having a little trouble?!"



“Who’re you calling *Mister Little*?! Adding ‘mister’ doesn’t make it any better!” Edward turned sharply toward the new voice and tossed aside the box to shove a room service cart that had been parked in front of another guest’s room. The cart rattled down the hall before crashing into the employee, and both the cart and employee went down.

He’s not fully awake, Alphonse realized. Edward had roused upon hearing the word *tiny*, but he still wasn’t fully alert. Barely conscious, logic meant nothing to him, and all the stress that had piled up during the day had exploded.

“Ed, we need you to calm down!”

“We? Wee ... you’re callin’ me wee?!”

“No, how’d you even get that?! What’s wrong with your ears, Ed?!”

There wasn’t much they could do when Edward was like this.

“Mr. Alphonse, what’s going on with Mr. Edward?! Why is he so mad?! He seemed like such a wonderful person during the day!” the journalist cried out, while Edward once again chased him with the box.

It wasn’t just the journalist; Edward was now going after another guest who had come out of their room at the commotion. The whole ruckus headed down the stairs.

Alphonse heard screams in the distance.

“Mr. Alphonse, please answer! What happened to the calm, kind gentleman Mr. Edward used to be?!” the journalist asked.

“I don’t feel so good,” Alphonse said, clutching his nonexistent stomach as the hotel turned to pandemonium around him.

APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR had passed since the start of Edward’s rampage.

The police had come to drag away the thieves and were taking a statement from Edward, who blinked innocently at them after having finally woken up. Meanwhile, Alphonse sat across from the journalist in the dining hall.

The journalist had unrolled the draft from his pocket and, despite having proclaimed it was complete, was now scratching away at it again, sometimes

writing additions and at other times scratching things out.

The hotel had gradually settled back down after its trip into chaos. Alphonse had fixed the broken walls and doors scattered all around the hotel, as well as any shattered dishes. Edward had agreed to clean up the wrecked room after the military police left.

As he continued editing his manuscript, the journalist rubbed distractedly at the bump that had formed on his forehead from when he had tripped. When Alphonse saw the journalist erasing the words “kind and thoughtful,” “gentle demeanor,” and “well-mannered,” he slumped. He wondered if instead of “Person of the Week,” they’d get a “Monster of the Week” article.

The revisions were inevitable now that the journalist had learned the true form of his beloved state alchemist. Edward, in his half-asleep and stressed state, had chased down completely innocent bystanders. Apprehending the criminals hadn’t come anywhere close to making up for the rest of the violence, and there was no point in even trying to make excuses.

“You should write the truth, exactly as you saw it,” Alphonse said, resigned.

“I’ll be doing exactly that,” the journalist responded without lifting his head, his pen still moving.

Alphonse solemnly reflected on the past day. They’d planned on continuing their good deeds until Scar appeared, but it wouldn’t mean anything anymore, because as soon as the paper with the article was out, Edward’s good reputation would be gone.

What a fleeting dream, Alphonse thought wistfully, sighing. At the same time, the journalist stood up, apparently finished with his revisions.

“Here, this is the draft. Please take a look at it when you have the time.” The journalist pulled out a carbon copy from under the manuscript. He folded it carefully into fourths before offering it to Alphonse.

“Thank you.” Alphonse accepted the paper, but also had a hunch he knew what it contained. He couldn’t get himself to unfold it right then and there. Without reading the draft, he walked the journalist to the exit before turning to head back to their rooms, exhausted. A voice calling out from behind him made

him pause.

“Mr. Alphonse!”

When he turned back toward the entrance to the hotel, Alphonse saw the journalist standing out in the street, his hat in his hand and illuminated by the streetlamps.

“I wrote the truth as I saw it, just as you said. Mr. Edward wasn’t quite what I’d call a poised and elite state alchemist, and he even showed a side to himself that was foul-mouthed and violent. Yet despite that”—here, the man paused, before smiling brightly—“despite that, he was true to his own emotions and seemed more like a real, living person than any of us. Even while half-asleep, he brought the hammer of justice down on those evildoers and proved himself worthy of being the pride of our country, a state alchemist.”

Having said his part, the journalist bowed, then replaced his hat while carefully avoiding the bump on his head. He hurried off down the empty cobblestone roads.

“Mr. Journalist,” Alphonse said warmly, standing alone in the lobby, “thank you, truly.”

Alphonse voiced his gratitude for the man who had disappeared into the night of the city. He climbed the stairs to his room, his footsteps the only sound in the tranquil hotel now that the police had left.

Keeping his steps light so as to not wake any sleeping guests, Alphonse quietly opened the folded paper in his hand.

Edward was someone who was a little—no, *extremely*—reckless, and at times he could be wild. When he snapped, it was beyond all control. Despite that, and much to Alphonse’s happy relief, here was an example of a time where others still managed to notice the kindness buried deep beneath Edward’s prickly exterior.

Alphonse came to a stop in front of their room and started turning the recently fixed doorknob while unfolding the draft.

“Ed, I got the draft of the article. Do you want to read it togeth—” Alphonse abruptly snapped the door shut again.

Standing there in the empty hallway with his hand still on the doorknob, Alphonse stared at the words at the top of the page.

The journalist had done as promised. He had written the truth—exactly as it was.

He wrote about how Edward had done good deeds through alchemy, and included all the wonderful things people had said. He wrote about how Edward had managed to catch the bad guys, even while half-asleep. It was excellent writing—honest and without embellishment.

But it was *too* honest.

The headline, written in large text at the top of the article, read “Little Alchemist, Big Deeds.”

Alphonse stared at the paper for a full thirty seconds before quietly folding it. He didn’t want to think about how Edward would react upon reading it.

The journalist hadn’t meant it maliciously. There was no reason to think that anyone else would have been aware of the reason behind Edward’s rampage. Most people didn’t have such severe reactions to being called short, after all. The journalist had probably figured that Edward’s foul mood had been caused by being woken up when exhausted. Even if Alphonse *did* tell the journalist the truth after everything that had happened, he imagined the response: “He flipped over something that trivial?” It’d only prove that Edward was petty.

Alphonse didn’t have a clue how he was supposed to even begin handling this.

All he could say for certain was that when the time came that Edward would try to break into the newspaper company’s office on a rampage, Alphonse would be the only person who could hold his brother back.

That, and the fact that once the paper was distributed throughout the country, the forbidden word would likely establish itself as an epithet for Edward. When that happened, it would once again be Alphonse’s responsibility to pacify his brother.

Well, Alphonse thought, *it’s not like Ed had a good reputation to begin with.* This was nothing new.

At least, that's what Alphonse tried to tell himself.

In the end, it was Alphonse's fate to run around covering for Edward. At this point, he might as well give up and accept that.

Feeling strangely enlightened, Alphonse opened the door once again, this time to help Edward, who was no doubt working on cleaning up their room. Instead, Alphonse found Edward sleeping, oblivious to his little brother's concerns and snoring away without a care in the world.

Alphonse was met with a cracked pitcher, an open trunk, and crumpled clothes strewn all over. The room, trashed in the wake of Edward's rampage, remained a mess. It was clear at a glance that Edward had exhausted all his energy flailing about earlier and had fallen right back asleep.

Alphonse didn't have any words.

He draped a blanket over his brother's exposed belly and silently cleaned up the room.

Reflecting on how everything that could have gone wrong had indeed gone wrong throughout the day, Alphonse prayed from the bottom of his heart that, if nothing else, their original goal from the first day—to draw out Scar—would meet with some success.

Maybe if he wished hard enough, his prayers would be heard.

As if in answer, Scar appeared the very next day. On top of that, part of the newspaper building was destroyed in the ensuing battle, and the "Person of the Week" section was gone for good. It might have been a gift from above to the jaded Alphonse, who needed someone to cut him a break.

Sometime later, Roy and Havoc learned of the demise of the "Person of the Week" and sulked over losing their free drinks. Likewise, Edward threw a tantrum when he realized he would not be in the paper.

No one needed to know that Alphonse, and he alone, felt relieved.



AFTERWORD



GREETINGS, MAKOTO INOUE HERE. Did you enjoy reading my little foray into the world of Arakawa Sensei's *Fullmetal Alchemist*?

I regret to inform you, but this time the afterword is short, so I'll give you a mini update! (Not about me, but about my pets.)

First, I must report back on the results of the "Can a bird fit in someone's mouth?" experiments from the afterword of the fifth volume, *The Ties That Bind*! The truth is the experiments only really consisted of me opening my mouth really wide in front of my Java sparrow.

My bird looked very interested and had a good look around the inside of my mouth, but when I asked her, "Wanna come in?" with my mouth still open, she seemed to not take a liking to the way my tongue moved. I got pecked.

In conclusion, it seems that my sparrow *does* have an interest in the inside of people's mouths, but she sure doesn't care for tongues. My overall conclusion is "Ow." That's it!

The chipmunk is also doing fine. Once when I let him loose, he got on top of my keyboard. When I asked him, "Did you come to help?" he stepped on my delete key and got rid of five whole lines all at once.

And, when I screamed, my sparrow saw the inside of my mouth and gave me a pecking. And now you know what a hazardous work environment I'm toiling away in (*ha ha*).

Looks like we've gotten to the end. To Arakawa Sensei, who checked over the

novel despite being busy; Nomoto-san, who always gave me pointers that were nothing short of genius; everyone else involved in the project; and all of you who read this book and everyone who sent in letters, I am genuinely grateful. Thank you so very much!





Your always-grateful Arakawa here. Thanks to the help of a bunch of people including of course Inoue Sensei, here's the sixth Fullmetal novel! This one is about Winry. I hope you enjoy it.

People really do make mistakes and grow just like Winry does here.

To those of you pursuing your dreams, don't be discouraged and keep moving forward.



あらか
わ
2007. 3がつ
Hiromu
Arakawa
March 2007

**Winry has obtained
the legendary wrench!**

Her attack rose by 10,000!
Her girliness rose by 3!
Edward's fear rose by 5!

